

THUNDER ON THE PLAINS

# BRAVELANDS

REALM OF LOST SPIRITS



ERIN HUNTER

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE *WARRIORS* SERIES



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SPIRITS

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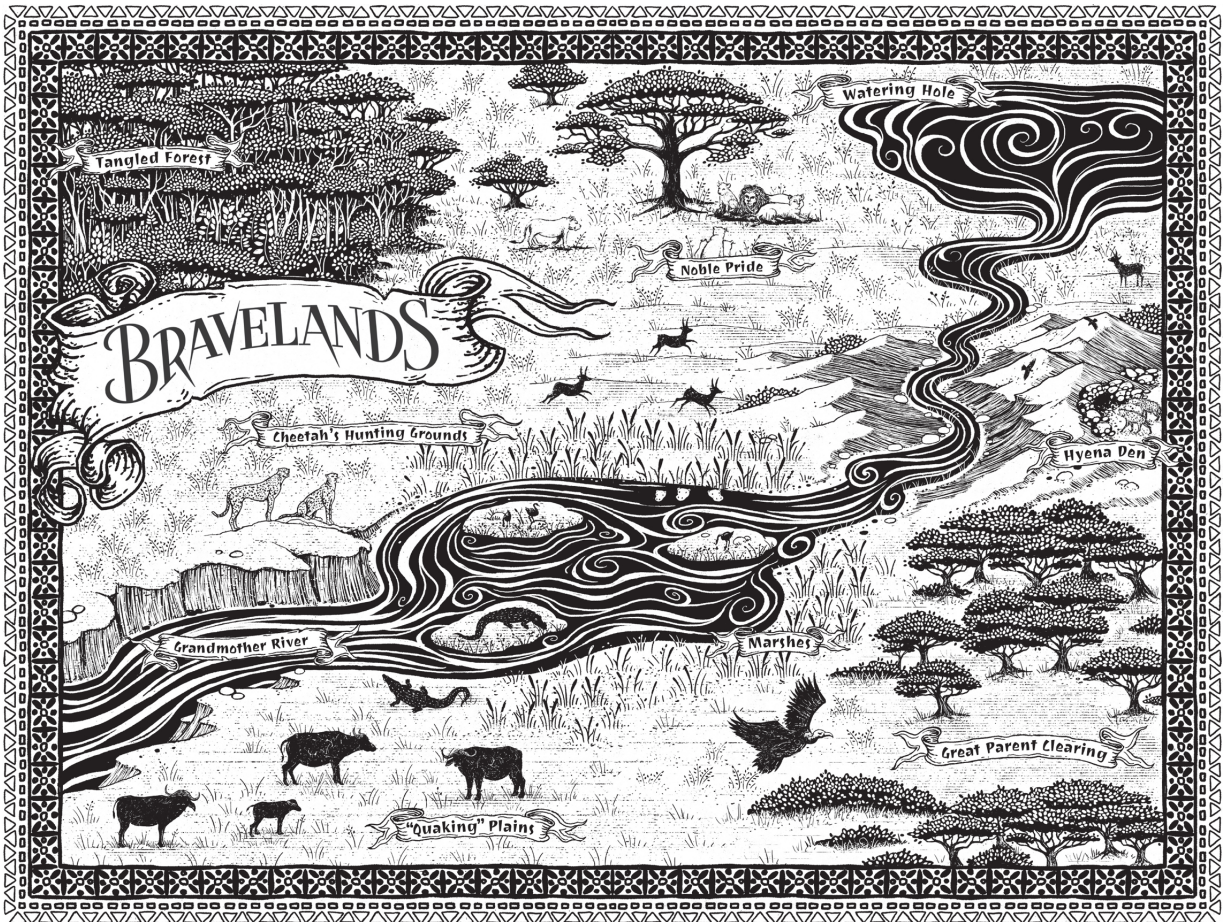
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## Prologue

*They call me the Great Devourer. Death. The End.*

I've been known by a hundred other names. There was a time when every type of creature, whether of the land, air, or water, would whisper my presence. But even the hyenas, once my most loyal attendants, rarely speak of me now. Even they are under the thrall of my old enemy, my rival. The one they call the Great Spirit. The sunlit world is in love with life, and it sickens me.

*Balance*, the Spirit says. *Let there be balance. Let there be life, then death.*

But that is a lie, a perversion. I have been cheated out of what is rightfully mine.

I have been patient, so very, very patient, with the disrespect of every living creature that crawls, flies, or swims beneath the distant sun. Despite my inevitability, despite the respect that *should* be due to the only constant in the world: every creature wakes from slumber every day and chooses to *live*. They know they cannot escape me, and yet they try, over and over again.

The Spirit tells its weak and craven followers to cling to their so-called Code, to impose order and peace on a world that should have no use for such contrivances.

In return for following this Code, those spirits who do submit—and they all submit, in the end—to Death are treated to a peaceful eternity of starry oblivion. Those spirits that are mine, by right, are permitted to flee from me even after they have nothing left to lose.

I grow very tired of this so-called *balance*. I am tired of waiting, of stalking the sick and reckless, chasing after creatures that flee from me at every turn. I am hated and feared. And yet I can be so much more hateful, so much more fearful, than they can even guess.

Time is my tool, but so are greed, jealousy, hate, and chaos. If the good and worthy of Bravelands will not come to me, then I will take the Codebreakers and use their strength for my own purposes. And there have been such spirits in abundance, and some that shook the whole world with their hate: Stinger the cunning, Titan the spirit-eater, the great snake Grandmother, and so many more.

If the living choose to run from me, let them. I will chase them down and turn their base desires against them. Justice withers under the glare of vengeance. Friendship shatters under the smallest pressure. As the tiniest seed writhes and wriggles to escape my grasp, so will the seeds of havoc grow in their minds.

There was a time when I was the only thing that mattered. I held the sun itself in my paws, before the upstart *Life* stole it from me. And I will hold it again, at the end of this world. Bravelands will be remade as it should be—a place of *true* balance, of life that is born only to die. When the time comes, this place will be a kingdom of death.



# 1

*The sunset blazed on the horizon, and Stride watched it sink into the earth with an irrational shudder, despite the dry heat that made his tongue sticky in his jaws. The sun could not set the plains ablaze, no matter how furiously hot the day had been. He stretched out along the branch of the tree at the edge of the forest, spread his forelegs, and extended his claws, trying to let some air flow around his paw pads.*

The rains were long past due, and still the long, hot season wore on. Creatures flocked to the shade of the trees, but the leaves of the canopy were withering on their branches, turning brown and crisp. There was so little water that a single flash of lightning could burn half the Great Parent's

forest. The only comfort Stride could find in the unforgiving blue sky was that it meant there would be no storms anytime soon. It would be cold later, and the creatures of Bravelands would be shivering under the pale stars.

His old friend Pace had told him a story once about a cheetah who stole the sun from the underworld and outran Death to bring it back to Bravelands. He had been sure it wasn't true, at least not exactly the way Pace had told it. And yet everything he'd seen, everything that had led him here to the outskirts of Great Mother Starlight's forest . . . it had all chipped away at his understanding of the world.

He had seen the strange colors and shadowy shapes that followed any cheetah who ran too fast, but he never thought he was truly being chased by *Death*.

Then Flicker had been taken. She'd had no injury, no sickness. One moment she was alive and running, and the next, the darkness washed over her and she was dead.

They had had so little time.

*So am I supposed to believe that Death took Flicker because it was jealous? Because a cheetah stole the sun? Could Death truly be so . . . petty?*

It didn't make sense. And yet if it wasn't true, where was Flicker now? Where was her spirit? She should have gone to the stars, as all spirits did, but the strangeness hadn't ended with her death. He had seen her form dragged into some sort of terrible fissure in the ground, and he knew, in his bones, that it hadn't been a dream.

*The Great Devourer can't be cheated. Death can't be outrun. Those are stories for cubs.*

The real world was no less strange than the old stories—only less fair.

He licked at the scratches on his leg, trying to clean them without worrying at them too much. They itched, and the sensation nagged at Stride, a constant reminder that alongside his mate's death, the rains that hadn't come, and the dark spirit that maybe meant Bravelands harm, he had one more problem: Jinks. The other cheetah had thought Flicker was *his*, and when he found out she'd died while she was with Stride . . . his reaction hadn't been driven by any kind of love, Stride was sure of that. It was as if Stride had stolen his territory or destroyed his coalition.

*Which we did*, Stride thought, with a pang of bitter satisfaction.



Now Jinks had offered a reward to any cheetah willing to catch and cripple Stride. Not to break the Code—not directly, anyhow. But any cheetah who carried out the brutal task would surely know a lame cheetah was a dead cheetah—in time.

Stride narrowed his eyes as he peered out over the plain. He could just make out the muddy channel that had once been the flowing Golden River, between the Great Mother's clearing in the forest and the closest watering hole. Long shadows leaped and shuddered through the grass, out of proportion with the tiny dik-diks that cast them as they pranced nervously beside the dry riverbed.

Stride licked his muzzle. He was getting a little hungry. It was hard to be a predator in the Great Mother's forest, where the creatures coming to ask for her help and advice did so on the understanding of safe passage and sanctuary. And the prey animals on the plain had been careless lately. The buffalo herd stomping around, not migrating as they should, gave the other herd animals a false sense of security. It wouldn't be hard to pick off one of those dik-diks. . . . He would just have to get up, cross the boiling plain, and chase after one.

It wasn't a very tempting prospect. . . .

"Are you going to lie up there all day?"

Stride looked down. At the base of the tree, a small black-and-white face was grimacing up at him with a friendly sort of sneer. It was Stonehide the honey badger, Stride's closest ally and his strangest friend. His small size belied a talent for fighting—and more importantly, a willingness to take on any creature who looked at him the wrong way.

"You're just jealous," Stride said airily. "Because I'm up here in this comfy tree and you're stuck down there on the ground. Or are you afraid to join me?"

Stonehide bared his teeth at Stride. "I'm not afraid of anything, I just have no *need* to climb trees. I can get everything I want down here, thank you very much. Anyway, mate: Great Mother wants to speak to you."

Stride's ears pricked up. "What about? Did she say?"

Stonehide shook his head. "Nope. I wouldn't get my hopes up if I were you."

"I don't know what you mean," Stride sniffed.

Stonehide's nose wrinkled up, and his eyes gleamed as he fixed Stride with a stare. "You do. That business with Flicker . . . it's time to accept that

Starlight isn't going to give you the answers you're looking for."

Stride slid down from the tree and put his nose close to Stonehide's implacable face.

"I'm not giving up on her," he said.

Stonehide maintained his unblinking expression. "I know it's tough. I *know*. But if Starlight says there's nothing you can do, eventually you *have* to let her go."

Stride scoffed and turned away with a swish of his tail. "Strong words from you! I've seen you chasing butterflies, convinced they were *your* mate trying to give you a message!" He headed into the forest toward the Great Mother's clearing, and the honey badger shuffled after him.

"I get confused in my old age," muttered Stonehide, although he didn't sound convinced *or* convincing. "Who knows what I really saw? The point is, I've accepted that Silvertail is dead, and nothing I can do is going to bring her back. So I'm one step ahead of *you*. I've moved on."

"Well, I've not," said Stride. "I can't. Not until I find out what's happened to her spirit."

"And if the Great Mother can't help you—or help *her*, if you want to put it like that—with that, then nobody can," Stonehide said.

Stride didn't respond.

Stonehide had a point, perhaps more of one than he even realized. Great Mother Starlight had already confided in Stride that the Great Devourer might well be hoarding spirits that should have gone to the stars, that it might have been empowered by a parade of dead Codebreakers . . . but she had had no plan to stop it, or challenge it. If that didn't change, then Flicker might truly be lost—and all the spirits of Bravelands with her.

The dry undergrowth of the forest crunched beneath Stride's paws as they entered the long tree tunnel that had been trampled down and widened to allow the elephants to pass into the clearing. The canopy above had been green and dark when they'd first encountered the Great Mother's herd here. It was starting to look thin and brown now, though it still gave the Great Mother's visitors a welcome shelter from the heat of the day when they came to consult with her.

From dawn till dusk, there was usually a steady trickle of animals seeking their audience, and a soft chatter from the clearing as the waiting visitors told one another their woes and worries. As Stride and Stonehide made their way toward the clearing, they encountered a young rhino who

stomped past, shaking the dry ground and not looking at them. Typical rhino behavior, in Stride's experience. Then there was a group of monkeys, walking slowly, heads bent and muttering to one another. A moment later, a great group of various creatures appeared at the end of the tunnel, and Stride's ears twitched at the sound of loud grumbling.

A few more animals—two impalas, a gaggle of meerkats, and one golden jackal—turned away from the rest and started down the tunnel.

"It's shocking," complained one of the impalas.

"What is a Great Parent *for*," drawled the other, "if not to help us in a crisis?"

The meerkats were babbling something similar, all talking over one another so that Stride could barely make it out, but he heard the phrases *no water* and *no help* come up more than once. Stonehide cast Stride a narrow-eyed look.

They pressed up to the crowd in the clearing, hearing much the same from the tone of the animals all around them, leopards and gazelles and wildcats and one giraffe all looking around and grouching to one another as they started to reluctantly step out into the trees.

"Again, Starlight cannot see any of you today," came a voice over the irritated hubbub. Stride peered across the heads and backs of the animals and saw a baboon standing on a rock, waving his arms. Stride recognized him—this was Grass Starleaf, Starlight's helper.

"She sends her sincere apologies! She is weary from many hours of discussion, she is doing all she can to solve our common problems. Please feel free to come back tomorrow. . . ."

"We're running out of tomorrows!" brayed a zebra, kicking its hooves in the dirt.

"There's no water, soon there'll be no food," agreed the giraffe. "What is our Great Parent going to do about it?"

"Great Mother is doing everything she can," the baboon repeated, "but she cannot feed you on demand."

This brought another volley of complaints, and Stride had a strong feeling it wasn't the first time that Grass had delivered disappointing news, but perhaps he hadn't put it so bluntly before. More of the animals in the clearing were turning away now, though a few held firm, trying to argue with Grass, or with one another, or simply sitting down to wait right where they were.

“You’re *sure* Great Mother asked for me?” Stride murmured to Stonehide.

“Look,” Stonehide said, nodding up toward Grass. Stride looked up and saw that Grass was staring right at him, and as their gazes met he gave a small nod and gestured behind him, into the trees behind the large jutting rock.

“Come on,” said Stonehide. “Let’s sneak around the edge. Let’s do this poor baboon a favor and not let this lot see where we’re going, shall we?”

They slunk into the trees and made their way through the crunching undergrowth, leaving the bickering animals in the clearing and coming upon a shady bower on the other side of the big rock, where Great Mother Starlight was sitting. She had lowered herself to the ground, her huge front legs curled underneath herself. Her head and ears were drooping, her eyes were closed, and her trunk rested on the ground. She looked like she was asleep, and for a horrible moment Stride wondered if it was worse than that—but at their approach she opened one eye and then the other, and raised her head again with a long breath.

“Good evening, Stride,” she said, in her low, musical voice. “Thank you, Stonehide. I am glad you came.”

“Of course,” Stride said. “It . . . looks like you had a hard day.”

Starlight nodded slowly. “It has been. . . . I have done my best. But I cannot make the rains come, or heal the sick, or return those who have been lost to their loved ones. And I cannot force the soil to sprout new grass. All I can do is try to spread calm and comfort . . . and try to find the rot at the root of these things and pull it out before it spreads.”

“How can we help?” Stride asked. He felt an itch in his paws, longing to flat-out ask her whether this odd summons had something to do with Flicker, but he knew she would think he was being blinkered, perhaps selfish, so he kept his questions to himself and simply hoped with every muscle in his body.

His hopes rose as Starlight said, “I think the Great Devourer is to blame for much of the misery I see in Bravelands now—indirectly, but I feel its influence all around me. Your mate Flicker may be just a small part of a much bigger, more insidious issue.”

Stride tried to hide his irritation at Flicker’s plight being described this way and waited patiently for her to go on.



“The Great Devourer is, without question, preventing the souls of the dead from going to the stars. It is, instead, herding them into its own realm, and there they strengthen it. The spirits cannot find peace, and nor can those left behind. A wave of grief washes over Bravelands, and vengeance creeps in its wake, leading only to more death. I believe that the Great Devourer is planning to venture forth into our world, and when that happens . . . the reigns of Stinger and Titan will look like times of peace and plenty in comparison. And this is where you come in, dear Stride.”

Stride shivered. He suddenly felt very small. “All right,” he said. “How? What do you need me to do?”

“There is a certain hyena,” said Starlight. “I need you to find her. Follow her. I think she may be important.”

“A hyena?” Stride sneered before he could stop himself. “What can one hyena do?”

Stonehide nodded along beside him. “Disgusting creatures. I suppose it would make sense they’d be involved in all this, though, as rot-eaters.”

“Hyenas may seem lowly to you,” said Starlight sternly, “but they have their place in Bravelands too—and there was a time when they were in the ascendant, the loyal servants of the Great Devourer in the physical world. Long, long ago, they were as powerful as the lions are today, and even more ruthless. They were said to live in low tunnels underground, to be closer to the Devourer. Do not underestimate them.”

Stride dipped his head obediently, cowed by her intensity. This wasn’t a story he’d heard before. Hyenas, as far as he was concerned, were nothing but pests and opportunists, forever on the lookout for prey to steal, ganging up en masse to overpower the real hunters of Bravelands.

“This hyena, Breathstealer,” continued Starlight, “has already been contacted by the Great Devourer itself. It offers her boons and visions. I have already sent a friend to try to gently persuade her away from its influence . . . but he has failed, for now. I would like you to try next. Tell me what she’s doing now. She and her clan live around the great baobab tree, but she ranges farther from it than most.”

“And you just want me to watch her?” Stride hoped it wasn’t more. As much as he loathed hyenas and found them contemptible, he wouldn’t have much chance in a one-on-one battle.

“For now.” Starlight fixed Stride with an intense look. “We need information, not more death. Be patient, and careful. And don’t go *too* fast

—you’ll have a companion with you, after all.”

She swung her gaze around and fixed it on Stonehide.

“I can keep up,” said the honey badger with a toothy grin.



## 2

*Breathstealer* licked her muzzle, the delicious tang of blood still lingering on her fur. Her belly was full, her eyelids heavy. The sounds of contented chewing, snoring, and low chatter filled the air around the giant baobab tree.

*We did this*, she thought. *Nosebiter and I.*

Her sister was the clan's leader now, and she was a good, measured, strong leader—not afraid to make decisions, and not following their mother's obsessive path: attacking lions and making deals with rogue buffalo in search of glory that never quite came.

But it was Breathstealer's connection to the Great Devourer that had brought this peace and plenty to the clan. The Devourer had dropped two whole adult buffalo at their paws, not to mention the corpse of Noble, the lion who'd led his pride in a bloody and ultimately futile war against the hyena clan. They had picked his bones clean, fighting with the vultures for the final scraps.

Insects danced lazily around the bloodied muzzles and paws of the hyenas. Breathstealer watched them, alert for patterns in their swarming or other strange behavior that might mean the Devourer was close by, about to drag her into another odd vision or make some cryptic demand. But there was nothing.

"Excuse me," said a quiet voice. "E-excuse . . ."

"Hey!" barked Spinesnapper. "That's my tail you're standing on!"

Breathstealer looked up. It was a male hyena, stepping among the females with his head bowed appropriately low. At Spinesnapper's yelp, he staggered back a pace and then dropped down to the knees of his forelegs, bending his paws under himself. Suitably humbled, he half walked, half crawled past Spinesnapper, still on his knees. She snapped at his rear ankles as he wriggled past.

"What do you want, Cub?" Ribsmasher demanded lazily.

"I seek an audience," the male said nervously. "With Breathstealer."

"I'm here," said Breathstealer, getting up. "Do you come with news?"

"I did as you asked," said Cub. "I went to scout the pride."

"As *you* asked?" sneered Hidetearer. She narrowed her eyes at Breathstealer. "Giving orders now, are you?"

"The males are all of ours to command, aren't they?" Breathstealer said flatly. She met Hidetearer's eyes steadily, daring the other hyena to make another comment. Hidetearer flinched away. Breathstealer assumed she was remembering the great cloud of large black spiders that had hung over her head after she called Breathstealer a freak and demanded she leave the clan. The Great Devourer had not harmed Hidetearer, but the message had been clear. *Cross me, and pay the price.*

"She has a point, Breathstealer," said another voice. Breathstealer turned to see Nosebiter approaching them. The male saw their leader and tried to press his nose even farther into the ground, and Breathstealer also dipped her knees to her sister.

“I didn’t mean to overstep, Nosebiter,” she said. “I just wanted to know what Noblepride—whatever lions are left—is up to now that their leader is no more.”

*Come on, Nosey, it’s no big deal, you know it. You’ll back me up in front of Hidetearer, right?*

Nosebiter seemed to consider this, but not very long. “Continue, Cub,” she said, with a twitch of her tail indicating that Breathstealer should rise. “What did you find?”

Cub straightened up, seeming more confident now—Breathstealer didn’t blame him for being nervous, any male caught between warring females would be lucky to escape without injury—and gave Breathstealer and Nosebiter a panting grin.

“The lions are in bad shape,” he reported. “The others are still squabbling, all the males fighting one another, half the females have left, and those who picked sides have had their cubs killed. So much for their *Code*—when power’s involved, they’re as savage as we are. It really could be the end of the pride.”

“Leaving empty territory for us and corpses for the vultures,” said Nosebiter with relish.

“We should attack,” said Hidetearer. “While they’re fighting one another, we can drive them right out. A few bad wounds at a time like this, they’ll fear us more than ever. The plains will be ours!”

Breathstealer rolled her eyes. “Ridiculous. An attack now is as likely to make them band together. And then we’d have risked our own warriors and be right back where we started. Let them crumble by themselves, they don’t need our help.”

“No true hyena leader would refuse the chance to take territory from lions,” muttered Hidetearer darkly.

“Don’t you *dare* presume to tell me what a true leader would do!” Nosebiter howled at her, making Cub and half the other females startle and bristle with fright. “You’re not clever, Hidetearer, don’t try to be subtle.”

Hidetearer recoiled with a hiss, and Breathstealer allowed herself to smirk at her old rival.

“*We survive*,” Breathstealer said to Nosebiter. “That’s our motto. There’s no point risking hyena lives for this.”

“We survive when our enemies don’t,” snarled Hidetearer. “You’re showing your soft belly again, Breathstealer. You’ve always had a *kind*

streak.”

“Kind? To let the lions destroy themselves?” Breathstealer spat. “No. I’m being pragmatic. . . .”

“And who asked for *Tailgrabber’s* advice anyway?” Hidetearer said, addressing the gathering crowd of hyenas.

Breathstealer bristled with annoyance at her old name being used, her hackles rising. She stepped toward Hidetearer. “Would you like to find out how *kind* I really am?”

“Enough!” snapped Nosebiter. She moved between them, forcing them both to look at her and not just each other.

“You really trust her?” Hidetearer whined at Nosebiter. “She hides behind her weird connection to the Great Devourer. Who knows? Maybe she’ll turn her insect friends on you next!”

“The clan has prospered since Breathstealer returned, bringing the Devourer’s bounty with her,” Nosebiter said coolly. “I’m sure you’re not saying the Great Devourer itself cannot be trusted,” she added with a slight frown. “That would be foolish of you, wouldn’t it?”

Hidetearer blinked and scratched with a claw on the hot, dry earth, as if she’d suddenly remembered she’d been digging for ants there a moment ago. “Of course not,” she said.

“We will do nothing yet,” Nosebiter announced, in a voice that reached every twitching ear around the baobab tree. “Let us wait and see if the lions even manage to become a pride again—if they turn a united face against us again, we’ll be ready to meet them.”

With a muttering of mostly good-humored acceptance, the hyenas began to turn away from their leader. Breathstealer suspected half of them had been hoping she would fight Hidetearer right then and there.

*Not yet, she thought. We all know Hidetearer’s end is coming, and probably at my paws—but not yet.*

She wondered if Hidetearer knew it. . . .

When things had quieted down a little and Cub had slunk back to the other males, Breathstealer sat down beside her sister and cleaned her ears with a paw for a moment, letting her thoughts settle before she spoke.

“I really didn’t mean to overstep,” she began. “I will ask before I do something else like sending a cub to the lions, if you want me to.”

Nosebiter looked up at her with a soft huff of amusement. “I trust you,” she said. “Mostly. But for *your* sake, if you don’t want to keep having this

argument with Hidetearer and her friends, you could make sure I know what you're up to before it comes back to bite your ankles."

"That's fair," said Breathstealer with a grin. She paused. "Nosey . . . *do* you trust me? Are you glad I came back because I'm useful, or just because we're littermates, or . . . ." She trailed off, not really sure what she was asking.

"Both, of course," Nosebiter responded, just as Breathstealer had hoped she would. "You know I don't always *understand* you, and I certainly never understood your . . . your connection to the Devourer, whatever it is. But I do trust you. And anyway . . . soon I'll need all the help I can get."

"What do you mean?" Breathstealer asked with a frown. "Do you think one of the others is going to challenge you?"

"No," said Nosebiter with a happy blink. "I'm having cubs again."

"Oh! *Oh!*" Breathstealer leaped up to her paws and turned in an excited circle. "I'm going to be an aunt! What a blessing, sister!" She nuzzled into Nosebiter's shoulder, and her sister chuckled.

"It's a bit early to call it a blessing," Nosebiter said. "Right now it's more of a stomachache. But thank you. It will be good to be a mother again. I liked it."

Breathstealer nodded, her heart squeezing a little, remembering Nosebiter's last cub. A sweet little male, he had been a bundle of soft, clumsy fur before he was killed by the lions who had been Noblepride.

*And in return, Gutripper made sure their cubs suffered just the same,* she thought,

*They say we're cruel and merciless, but we're the same underneath. We all want to survive. We're all just . . . hungry.*

"Keep it to yourself for the moment," Nosebiter said, jolting Breathstealer back to the present—a present where, in fact, she was full-bellied and satisfied, and only good things seemed to be on the horizon. Once the rains finally came, there would be plenty to drink again, and when Nosebiter had her new cubs, things would be perfect. "And Breathstealer . . . maybe keep the Great Devourer weirdness to a minimum around the others. I know, I know, you can't always choose when it's going to . . . contact you," she said quickly as Breathstealer opened her mouth to protest. "But if you want to keep the peace, perhaps don't threaten hyenas you don't like with death by venomous spider. Hmm?"

Breathstealer let out a snort. "When you put it like that," she giggled.







### 3

*“Catch it! Catch it!”*

*“I’ve got it!”*

The large, dried-out mango flew through the air, and Echo reared up, trying to headbutt it with his horns. It struck his head and bounced off at a wild, spinning angle into the trees.

“I haven’t got it!” Echo laughed, and he charged into the undergrowth, hopping and kicking his back legs. The young elephant followed him, swinging her trunk and hooting with laughter. Soon they were both wedged in between the trees, giggling and reaching for the mango. The little elephant, Sunshine, managed to grab it with her trunk and tossed it up into

the air, where it landed in the crook of a branch, and the two young animals fell about laughing once again.

It was such a beautiful sound. Whisper felt like she could happily have stood here, in the shadow of Sunshine's mother, Hurricane, watching the two of them play for the rest of her life.

Echo deserved to have some fun after everything he had been through. He had been attacked by hyenas, almost drowned, threatened by Holler and his cronies—not to mention he had been chosen, unlikely as it was, by the oxpeckers as the next leader of the buffalo herd.

The little birds were still with him now, flitting between the branches of the Great Mother's forest, some of them landing near the mango, buffeting it with their soft brown wings or pecking at it with their orange-and-yellow beaks. Whisper felt a little burst of savage amusement as she wondered how Holler and the others were faring without the oxpeckers to pick the flies from their hair. They would be miserable. It was a small, cold comfort after everything that had happened.

Happy as the little scene before her was, she knew deep inside that it was an illusion. They were on borrowed time. If Echo didn't lead the buffalo on their migration, the rains wouldn't come. If the rains didn't come, Bravelands would slowly die of thirst. Every plant, every creature. Earth would turn to dust and stone to sand, and there would be nothing to show there had ever been grassy plains and busy watering holes and laughing calves playing together in the shade.

But Echo couldn't lead the herd, for two reasons. One was Holler, the usurper who had taken on the role for himself, against custom. The second concern was that even if Holler stepped aside, Echo didn't know *how* to lead the migration. That knowledge—the Way, as it was called—had died along with Bellow. Normally he should have passed the wisdom to his successor, but his premature death had prevented it.

*What are we going to do?*

It was at least somewhat comforting to watch the oxpeckers flap and swoop around Echo, filling the air with joyous twittering. There was no way anyone could reasonably doubt that they had chosen him, despite his youth and inexperience. And Whisper found comfort that her little brother was safe for now, here under the protection of the elephants.

"Oh! Echo, watch out!" she gasped as the dried mango finally toppled from the tree above his head. He looked up and tried to dodge out of the

way, and somehow his legs got so tangled up together that he reared, staggered, fell, and the mango still bounced off his small horn with a hollow *bonk*.

Echo wasn't perturbed by any of it, getting right up and tossing the fruit off his horns toward the waiting trunk of Sunshine.

Whisper knew he couldn't be as carefree as he looked. For all his youth, he would be as worried as she was about the stalled migration, and about poor Bellow's untimely death.

She glanced up at Sunshine's mother, and a deep well of sadness opened in her chest. What would their own mother say, if she were here now? Would she have been able to protect Echo, when Whisper could not? Would she have somehow managed to stand up against Holler and the others? Even if she couldn't, she would surely have had advice, wise words for them to cling to in their darkest moments.

Great Mother Starlight had done her best, but the truth was that she didn't know what to do either. And that frightened Whisper almost more than anything else. If the Great Spirit itself couldn't help them find the Way . . . who could?

"Will you keep an eye on Echo for me?" she asked Hurricane.

"Of course," said the huge elephant.

Whisper nodded and left the two calves playing, wandering off into the trees near the Great Mother's clearing.

Whisper and her little brother would be safe with the elephants, for now. Holler had plotted to have each of them killed before, but he wouldn't be able to reach them here—and in any case, he had everything he'd wanted. Power, control, the attention—if not love—of every female in the herd, and first pick of whatever food was left to find in the drying grasslands. If Echo stayed out of his way, he'd have no reason to hurt him. At least, that's what Whisper hoped.

They could stay, hide from Echo's destiny, and hope that Great Mother Starlight would sort it all out. The temptation was strong—but not as strong as the horror she would feel if destruction came to Bravelands, and she did nothing to help.

The canopy above was patchy and drooping, allowing shafts of sunlight to burst through and sear the undergrowth. Baboons and birds clustered in the branches of the shadiest trees. As she walked, Whisper heard a scuffle and shout over her head, and saw a pair of baboons chasing after a white

vervet monkey who was clutching a juicy-looking mango. They swung out of her sight, but she could still hear the baboons' furious hooting of "*Thief!*" for some time afterward, as the leaves torn free by their disturbance fell to the ground at her feet. She hoped the monkey would have the sense to drop its prize if it couldn't get away. Animals would do some terrible things for fresh food these days.

"Whisper?" said a voice, and she startled. It was Quake, Holler's son, approaching through the trees. He was larger than her, with a hard boss already joining his horns together across his forehead.

"Do you need something?"

"No," Quake said. "I just—I didn't want to creep up on you by accident."

Whisper sighed. It was surprisingly thoughtful of him.

She still couldn't look at him without seeing the face of his father. Or worse, the face of her best friend, Murmur, who had been killed when Quake led them into quicksand. Sure, he hadn't gored or trampled her. But he had left them there to die on his father's orders, seemingly immune to Murmur's dying cries for help.

And yet . . . he *had* turned against Holler in the end. He had defied him to help her and Echo escape almost certain death. As Holler's favorite son, he could have had a position of power in the herd, but instead he'd chosen to be an outcast like her.

Deep in her heart, she didn't think she would ever be able to forgive him. But allies were thin on the ground, and she did think that she could probably trust him. He'd earned that.

"Have you seen it today?" Quake asked, nodding through the trees. For a moment Whisper wasn't sure what he meant—but then she realized she had looped around to the side of the Great Mother's clearing, and Quake was watching the animals assembling, waiting for Starlight's advice.

"It's early for it to be this crowded," Whisper agreed, coming to stand beside him.

It was louder too. She knew that Starlight had had to turn away some creatures the previous evening, and it seemed they had all returned this morning, some of them with friends, and they were picking up their complaining where they had left off. The atmosphere was palpably distressed and angry. Whisper tried to listen, to pick up the specifics of some complaints, but she couldn't make them out over the noise of the

crowd, until Starlight emerged across the clearing, and the milling creatures formed into something a bit more like a line, with a cluster of gazelles at the front, stomping their hooves and tossing their horns.

“Great Mother,” said one, bowing deeply, touching her long horns to the ground. She was immediately spoken over by her companions, who tossed their heads and kicked at the earth with their hooves in agitation.

“Great Mother, you *must* do something about the buffalo!”

“That’s right!” called out a hippopotamus from farther back in the line, and more and more voices joined them, disregarding the queue in their hurry to agree with the gazelles’ complaint.

“They’re hogging the watering hole! They won’t let anyone near!” shouted a kudu.

“They have completely taken over the fresh pasture. . . .”

“And they’re chasing off predators who aren’t even after them,” howled a scruffy-looking wolf.

Quake and Whisper exchanged glances. She saw the same resigned sadness in his eyes as she felt in her own heart. She wished she was more surprised. They knew Holler would be throwing his weight around, and in this burning-hot weather, if they refused to migrate, they would have to be squatting near the watering holes.

“Please,” said Starlight. “I understand your concerns, and I will do my best. But I cannot remove the herd from the watering hole any more than you can—and I would not if I could. We will find a way to share what little water there is. Now, let me hear your stories one at a time, and I will see what advice I can give.”

There was a discontented muttering from the crowd, who did not seem to hold out much hope that Starlight could help them—but they still stayed, waiting their turn to pour their hearts out to the Great Mother. Predators and prey, even birds, swooping and hopping over to land on the ground at her enormous paws.

There were no reptiles, but Whisper knew the Great Parent had the power to speak Sandtongue too, to understand their problems just like she could with birds and grass-eaters. The thought made her shudder a little—as a calf, she’d always thought crocodiles were so alien, with their strange bare skin and unknowable yellow eyes, seeking only to kill and eat young buffalo. But if cheetahs and lions had lives and loves and could be reasoned with, even befriended . . . why not crocodiles?

“Bellow always had a lot of respect for the Great Parent,” Quake muttered. “But I never used to understand. My father didn’t see the point in buffalo having anything to do with the Great Spirit. I think he thinks we’re above all that.”

“But you don’t think that anymore?” Whisper asked him.

“Well, it’s hard to watch her do this day after day,” he said, with a toss of his horns toward where Starlight was listening intently to another group of petitioners, “and not respect the Great Parent’s work. Right?”

“That’s what I think,” Whisper said with a small smile. “The buffalo *are* important, but the Great Spirit . . . it’s in everyone, everywhere. All Great Mother wants is to help the most animals the best she can.”

She looked at Quake and saw that his eyes looked strange, as if he was staring at something very far away.

“I never saw what Holler really was,” he murmured. “Even when—even when he told me to take you and Murmur to the quicksand and leave you there, I really thought he must be right, that the herd would be safer and better with him in charge, and it was worth anything to get him there. He never, ever understood why Bellow was chosen as leader instead of him. It ate away at him, like maggots infecting a wound. Maybe he was good and noble once, but he was consumed by his jealousy of Bellow. When we were alone, he could not stop talking about Bellow, criticizing his decisions, making it sound like there was a great injustice happening and only he could see it. Only he and I. It was quite . . .”

He trailed off, shaking his head. Whisper wasn’t sure if it was kinder to give him silence and let him reckon with his own thoughts or prompt him with what seemed suddenly obvious to her. In the end, she decided to speak.

“I bet that felt good,” she said. “I bet you felt very close to him in those moments.”

Quake looked up at her, his eyes wide, as if she had spoken the contents of his thoughts out loud.

“I’m just so sorry,” he said.

“I believe you,” said Whisper. “And you should take that as a compliment.”

Quake gave a tiny quirk of a smile.

“The question now is not whether we’re sorry for our mistakes,” Whisper went on. “It’s what we can do to make up for them.”



“I wish I could think of something.” Quake sighed. “But . . . look at this.” He nodded at the crowd of animals coming to see the Great Mother, filling the clearing and spilling out into the shade of the elephants’ tunnel. “What can we do if the Great Spirit can’t help them? Starlight is very wise, but I don’t think this is going to be solved with gentle advice. Maybe if she got all the elephants together and they marched on that watering hole . . . but even then, do you think my father would let it go?”

“He’d destroy the herd first,” Whisper said. “And if there’s no herd, there’s no migration, and we’re basically back where we started.”

“Face it,” said Quake in a dark voice. “If something doesn’t change soon, Holler has won—and that means everyone else has to lose with him.”



*“Ugh. Hyena dung.” Stride recoiled, his lips pulling back as the disgusting smell reached his nose. He took several steps back from the pile and shook his head, trying to free his muscles—his muzzle threatened to seize up at the strength of the foul smell.*

“Cheer up,” said Stonehide. “It means we’re going the right way, doesn’t it?” He wobbled to a stop and sat down. Stride made a show of cleaning his muzzle and pacing in circles for a moment, giving his friend a little bit more time to catch his breath. For all his posturing, and for all that he was fearsomely fast and vicious in battle, over long distances the honey badger struggled to keep up with Stride’s long, easy steps.

It didn't help that there had been no water for hours and hours. Not a puddle to be seen, even in watering holes Stride remembered as once being deep and generous.

They'd found the hyena clan easily enough, watching from a distance, listening to the chatter to establish which one was Breathstealer. Stride couldn't see what was so special about her. She was neither the most formidable to look at nor even the leader. But there'd been *something* in the way the others interacted with her. The odd sideways glance, not always friendly. More like a wariness that meant even at a distance, Stride could discern this Breathstealer was somehow viewed as an outsider.

She had peeled off from her clan just after dawn as the rest of them sat down to a meal of scavenged zebra carcasses left by bigger predators. Watching from the cover of a thornbush, Stride had seen her say something to one of the others, but mostly the rest of her clan had ignored her as she had gotten up and left.

And then she had just . . . walked. She'd seemed to have purpose, but no urgency in her stride. She knew where she was going, had been there before, but it was not close to her clan.

Stride had felt a little unsure, even resentful, about being sent to follow a hyena around, but now he couldn't help but tip over into deep curiosity. Where was she going? And what would she do there?

They had lost sight of Breathstealer as she had crossed a wide-open plain—in better times it had long grass for stalking through, but it had been seared by the sun and picked down to the ground by grass-eaters, so they had to take a longer, more hidden route behind a kopje and through some rocks, and by the time they found her trail again she'd gotten some way ahead. But the dung told them they were still on her tail.

"Ready to go on?" Stride asked.

Stonehide sniffed derisively. "Of course."

They followed the trail, sniffing for the half-rotten scent of hyena, and in a little while Stride stopped, squinting at something up ahead. A small mound, with half of a dead tree sticking up from it, splintered and broken as if it'd been torn down by a lightning strike or a strong wind. There was a dark spot among its roots.

"Is it a den?" hissed Stonehide. "It looks like a hyena den."

"Agreed. Why would she have a second den here, so far from her clan?"

They approached cautiously, listening out for the sound of movement. At first, there was nothing—then, suddenly, Stride’s ears twitched as he caught a scuffling, scrabbling noise on the edge of hearing. He sank into a crouch, poised to either pounce or run, and as his ears drew closer to the ground he realized that it didn’t sound like one animal moving around, or even two. It sounded like . . .

“Hey!”

“Hey you!”

“Get out!”

“Go away!”

A chorus of high-pitched, frightened yipping voices startled him, and he sprang up to look. Out of the hyena den popped three small tan faces, with their tiny eyes and ears ringed by black fur.

“Meerkats,” Stonehide said, with a degree of resignation.

“Stop there!”

“Stop, stop!” cried the meerkats, in their chattering chorus way. Several more faces appeared in the tunnel behind the ones who had popped up, peering out at the intruders with wide eyes. They bared their little teeth, sharp and angry, and clearly terrified. Stride immediately backed off and lay down on his belly, trying to present an unthreatening face to the small creatures. They nodded frantically to each other and turned in a single sharp movement to look at Stonehide.

“Him too!”

“Lie down, badger!”

“You too, get down!”

Stonehide narrowed his eyes at them. “Why should I? I’m not going to eat you. If you don’t believe that, get back in your burrow.”

One of the meerkats made a movement to duck inside, seemed to get stuck up against something, and was half pushed back out again. His comrades gave him angry glares as he stood back up.

“What, then?” he demanded, a slightly sheepish voice among the chorus of voices from the other sentries and from deeper in the burrow. “What do you want?”

“Go away!”

“Talking? Why?”

“Are they talking?”

“Talk about going away!”

“Listen . . . ,” Stride said, but the meerkats were jeering at them now, repeating themselves over and over—apparently if they weren’t a threat, they were quickly becoming a joke.

“Shut up!” Stonehide snapped. “Or I’ll dig you out of there, and my friend will chew you up, bones and all!”

“You shut up!” came a lone voice from the darkness, followed by a series of angry whispers.

“We’re looking for a hyena,” said Stride. “This was a hyena burrow, wasn’t it?”

“We found it like this,” said one of the sentinel meerkats.

“Can’t change it now.”

“Bones in the walls.”

“We didn’t kill it!”

“I didn’t think you had,” said Stride, trying to hide his laughter at the idea. “But have you seen a young hyena pass by here?”

“Oh!” said one meerkat.

“Oh, the weird one?” said another.

“She walks over there and she walks back?”

“She comes and she goes.”

“And she goes and she comes.”

“And she comes and . . .”

“And do you know *where* she goes?” Stride said, hoping he hadn’t started them on a repetitive path they couldn’t get off.

“She goes. And she . . .”

“To the Black Branches,” said the one who had tried to go back inside.

“All alone,” said another.

“Alone! A hyena!”

“Odd.”

“Odd, odd.”

“She comes and she goes . . .”

“And what for?”

“Black Branches is a bad place.”

“A bad place! Wet. But not *good* wet.”

“Wouldn’t go there for all the nuts in Bravelands.”

“All the grubs!”

“All the nuts and grubs!”

Stride let the chatter wash over him and tried to pick out the parts that would be useful. Stonehide gave a despairing shake of his head.

"Where is this Black Branches?" Stride asked.

"That way," said one meerkat with supreme confidence, entirely failing to gesture or even look in any particular direction.

"Stupid! This way!"

"That way!"

All of a sudden, *all* the meerkats were gesturing wildly, and Stride couldn't tell which if any of them meant anything. . . .

"*Bones*," snapped Stonehide, raking his long, sharp claws across the dry ground. "*And all*. Which way?"

The meerkats froze. Then they all spoke at once—and almost as unhelpfully as before. But after a moment, their cries of *away!* and *over there!* resolved to a repeated refrain:

"Toward the mountain!"

Stride turned and squinted into the distance. He knew at once where they must mean—there was a huge, purplish stain on the sky over in one direction that he vaguely knew to be a far-off mountain. He tried to see if he could spot these Black Branches, but his view was hindered by rocks and brush and the gentle rise and fall of the plain.

"Toward the mountain," Stride said to Stonehide, and the honey badger nodded back. "Thanks," he told the meerkats, and they turned to go.

"Wait, big cat," said one of the sentries. "Don't go."

"Don't go in the forest."

"The ground will eat you!"

"The tunnels are deep."

"And wet! And bad!"

"Disease and bad water!"

"Not for *all* the nuts *and* the grubs!"

"We have to go," said Stride. "But thank you for the warning."

"We'll be careful," said Stonehide firmly. "Goodbye."

The chorus of goodbyes and warnings, and a heated discussion about the merits of nuts versus grubs, followed Stride and Stonehide as they headed off toward the mountain.

"What do you think they meant about the ground eating us?" Stride asked when they were out of earshot of the meerkats.

"Let's just hope they meant it's muddy," said Stonehide darkly.

The Black Branches forest was unmistakable as soon as they passed over a hill and it loomed up on the horizon. Its dark and tangled canopy starkly contrasted with the pale, scorched ground, and it gave Stride a strange and uneasy feeling to look at—as if it had been dropped into Bravelands from some completely different landscape. As they approached, they saw it more clearly, and the more detail Stride saw, the less he liked it. The trees were tall, draped with thick vines and covered in moss and fungus in a rainbow of sickly greens and purples. The ones right on the edge of the forest looked ashy and sad in the searing heat, but farther in it seemed there was a darkness that couldn't be burned away.

There were other creatures here too, at least around the edges of the forest. A surprising number of small prey animals scattered as they approached, and a sickly-looking lone lion slunk up into a tree and watched them with distrust. As soon as they reached the trees, Stride understood why the animals were here. The ground underfoot was spongy and damp. Whatever else was in this place, the meerkats were right—there was water here, and right now, it made sense that some creatures would brave the creepy darkness in search of it. Stride's own throat felt drier than ever at the thought of finding something to drink.

"Excuse me," Stride said to the lion, staying a good distance from his tree. "Have you seen a hyena pass by here? Heading into the forest?"

The lion turned his head warily to stare deeper into the trees. He might have been indicating the way or simply ignoring them. Stride wasn't sure.

"Thanks, mate," said Stonehide with a casual chumminess that made the lion blink in surprise. As he and Stride were starting to move between the tall trees, their paws silent on the damp ground, they heard a rasping voice behind them.

"I wouldn't follow, if I were you," said the lion.

"I know," said Stride with a sigh. "But I think we have to."

The lion just rested his chin on his paws, watching them push through into the darkness.

The very air grew damp around them, and moisture gathered on Stride's whiskers. Something immediately began to bother him, his fur rippling along his spine, but it took him a little while to realize quite what it was: despite the animals gathering around its edges, deeper inside the forest there were no birds, no monkeys, almost no movement at all in the branches above him. A place like this, with water in the ground and plentiful shade,



should have been full of chattering animals—but all he could hear was the soft, relentless buzzing and chittering of insects.

Farther in, they came across a dark pool, cloudy and full of weeds, but Stride still hurried to the edge, his throat almost closing up as he put his muzzle to the cool water.

“Stride, stop! Not there!”

With some effort, Stride pulled back from the water, looking at Stonehide and then following his gaze across the pond. He reared back in horror when he saw what his friend had spotted. There was a dead animal, half in and half out of the water. It looked like it had once been a mammal, maybe another hyena or a fox, but now it was a waterlogged, maggot-ridden corpse. The top half, including the head, had been almost picked clean to the bone, whereas the back legs and tail were still covered in hair and horribly swollen flesh.

“Spirit’s *paws*,” Stride hissed. “Thanks, Stonehide.”

He’d seen hundreds of dead animals in his life. He’d killed plenty himself and seen his share of creatures rotting or picked apart by scavengers. But somehow, the *deadness* of this thing felt shocking. If it was possible for a creature to be *more dead* than dead, this one was.

“It’ll be fine,” he said, trying to calm himself, to summon every last ounce of courage. “Let’s press on, we have to find that hyena.”

“Right, yeah. Why are you whispering?” Stonehide asked in a low and distinctly breathy voice.

“I’m not!” Stride said. “You’re the one who’s whispering!” But he winced as he said it, and it came out quieter than he’d really intended.

He tried to focus on following the scent of hyena, but it was much harder here, in the thick vegetation, than out on the plains. There was a tinge of rot on the air that he didn’t like at all, and which wasn’t coming solely from the decaying corpse. He was starting to worry that despite following Breathstealer this far, they had managed to lose her. A few persistent flies kept bothering him, landing on his ears or his nose, distracting him when he thought he had found her scent again. At last, it was Stonehide who suddenly went stiff beside him, bristly fur ripping, and let out a warning hiss.

“She’s close,” he muttered. “Smell that?”

Stride took a deep sniff, his lip curling back at the smell of rot and decay, but underneath it there was the hyena scent, bloody and musky. They

slowed their pawsteps, trying to slip silently between the damp trees. The ground turned from soft earth to deep mud, and then to swamp. Stride listened hard, his ears swiveling, and he heard a gentle splashing movement just ahead. He sank down to his belly in the shallow water, wincing slightly as his spotted belly fur went into the mud, and watched through a patch of reeds as the shape of a medium-size female hyena stepped into view.

She looked so very ordinary. Not like some kind of avatar of death. Not even like a particularly impressive hyena.

*But she knows something about the Great Devourer. She might have answers that could help all of Bravelands—and she might know where Flicker is.*

So even though she was wading deeper through the swamp, ears twitching as the insects circled around her head, he was going to have to follow her.

Before they had gone more than a few cheetah-lengths, the mud and water in Stride's fur were slowing him down enough that he felt clumsy and nervous. He tried to keep his mind on where he was treading, on following Breathstealer without being scented or heard, and just be grateful that he wasn't Stonehide, who was swimming along beside him.

Up ahead, the insects were swarming. At first, Stride wasn't sure he believed what he was seeing, but soon it was undeniable: the insects were following the hyena, black clouds of flies and great hopping locusts gathering in Breathstealer's wake. Not landing on her. Not pestering. Just *following*.

"Hello," said a voice, and Stride and Stonehide both froze in their tracks. It was Breathstealer speaking. "I need your help."

*She's seen us! She . . .*

*Needs our help?*

But the hyena wasn't looking at them. Stride squinted into the dim swamp and saw that she was speaking to nothing, to the thin air. Or . . . maybe to the insects? There was nothing else there that Stride could make out, and yet Breathstealer tilted her head, as if listening, and nodded slightly.

Stride cast Stonehide a look of concern and saw the honey badger's muzzle wrinkle with dislike in return.

*What in Bravelands is going on?*





## 5

*Breathstealer paused, glancing over her shoulder. She saw nothing but buzzing flies and the dark, shifting shadows of the swamp.*

*Is she back there? Did she follow me all the way here?*

She wasn't certain it was Hidetearer who had followed her across the plain. It could have been a lion bent on revenge, or she might even have imagined it entirely. But if any creature was going to track her to the Great Devourer's lair, she suspected Hidetearer was the most likely. She probably wanted to see the source of Breathstealer's powers—maybe she wanted to stop her speaking to the Devourer, or even steal its blessing for herself.

But there was no sign of her now, and Breathstealer doubted Hidetearer would have had the stomach to wade so deep into the swamp.

All around her, the insects hummed and sang, swarming up in great clouds, settling over rocks and branches, always squirming and whirring. She glanced up at the thick canopy, draped with hundreds of thick vines and even more silky spiderwebs, where fat black spiders waited to catch any of the flies who strayed too high into the branches. The faintest light shone down from above her, filtered through a half-rotted canopy of sodden and black leaves. The nearest tree to her was a bent and sagging thing, arching over the water like a giant paw raking the surface with its claws.

She remembered her first visit to this place. She had almost drowned when she'd tried to turn away from the Great Devourer, and it did not feel safe, even now that they had reached more of an understanding. The fumes of rotting vegetation and the smell of death made her feel dizzy, and she knew that the water under her paws was, somehow, much deeper than it felt. As if the mud could be sucked away from beneath her, if she said or did the wrong thing. . . .

"Hello," she said.

The sound of the insects roared in her ears. Then, she heard its voice. From the insects. From the air. But making her bones resonate.

*"Why have you come?"*

The tree seemed to move a little, like a bird flexing its talons.

"I need your help," said Breathstealer.

*"Tell me,"* said the Great Devourer.

"I need to know about the lions. Some in our clan want to wipe them out while they're weak. I don't believe that's a good idea. But I need to know . . . how can I keep the lions weak? What is the greatest threat to our clan now?"

*"Two very different questions, faithful one,"* said the Great Devourer's voice. *"The lions are no threat to you. Hidetearer is."*

Breathstealer took a breath, among the buzzing flies and the dizzying scents of the swamp. It knew. Of course it did—Death was everywhere, it didn't need her to tell it about her petty disagreements. But still, hearing Hidetearer's name unprompted gave her shivers.

"I didn't think . . . I mean, she's a pain, and we never agree, but . . ."

*"She is working to undermine us. She will kill you and your sister and take your clan into a war that will destroy it,"* said the Great Devourer's

voice, resonating deep in her chest. *"She must be dealt with."*

"I could kill her," Breathstealer said, forcing herself to sound as casual yet serious as possible. She *could*, if she had to. . . . "But she has friends. It might put the clan in danger."

The voice of the Devourer rumbled, the water at her paws bubbling and the bent tree seeming to shudder. Breathstealer couldn't quite tell if it was a growl or a low laugh.

*"No need to act so obviously,"* it said. *"Listen carefully, and I shall tell you how we can be rid of her. . . ."*

Breathstealer walked a little slower on her way back to the clan. The Great Devourer's words followed her, haunting her steps. Its words, its deep and terrifying voice, all of it intoxicating and unnerving. It had whispered ways to manipulate her enemies, places she could lead them if they made too much trouble.

*Bring them to me, Breathstealer. Their spirits will never see the stars.*

Some of its words had touched that nerve in the back of her mind that had originally made her run away from it, brushing against a part of her that was still hesitant to throw herself without question into a partnership with death. But the feeling had been fleeting, and she'd reminded herself—what else was a hyena but an animal who was honest about death, when so many others lied to one another and to themselves? Wasn't it her duty to show the others that the Great Devourer could be their ally, just as the rot-meat of the plains could feed them? Wasn't it right that the hyenas should rise at the Devourer's side, after all these years of being looked down upon?

The feeling of being watched and followed traveled with her, all the way back to the great baobab tree, and she wondered if it had been the eyes of the Devourer all along, watching her approach and her return. Or could it simply have been her imagination? It was easy to see signs where there were none, when you were used to finding visions in the movements of insects.

Despite the Devourer's encouragement, by the time the baobab loomed up in front of her, she had decided she would begin by talking to Hidetearer, hyena to hyena. She would try to get Hidetearer to understand that they both wanted only the best for the clan and themselves—that was natural and right, wasn't it? They had offered their throats to Nosebiter, after all,

pledging that their blood was hers to drink—they hadn't done it to each other, and nor should they.

She was going over and over this imaginary conversation in her head, wondering how Hidetearer would respond, thinking of ways to counter her initial distrust, so she was close to the tree by the time she realized the chattering of the hyenas around it was not just an ordinary gathering of gossip and debate. A full-fledged argument was in progress, a crowd gathered to watch with nervously twitching tails and eyes alight with the intrigue of it all. And in the middle . . . was Hidetearer. Her muzzle was bleeding, and she was looking both cowed and mutinous as Nosebiter paced in front of her.

"And you lost *no* hyenas on this fool's errand?" Nosebiter demanded. "That's what you claimed when you returned. Is it true?"

Hidetearer swallowed, wincing. Her eyes flicked back and forth as if she was trying to think or make a decision. At last she said, "A few males only."

"*Hyenas*," Nosebiter snapped. "My hyenas. You took them from here and led them to their deaths without asking. You undermined my command by going to that pride in the first place, and you achieved—what, exactly?"

Breathstealer shouldered her way into the crowd and caught Nosebiter's eye. Her sister gave her a furious, despairing look.

*She went after the lions anyway, Breathstealer thought. After everything we've said. And without permission from the leader!*

"We gave the lions a licking," Hidetearer snarled defensively. "We raided their prey and wounded one. . . ."

"One wounded lion," barked Nosebiter. "Is that a good exchange for more than one hyena life? Did you learn anything useful, or did you simply draw their attention back to us, away from killing each other?"

Hidetearer sniffed, wincing again at the pain in her muzzle.

"Why should an attack on lions be *useful*?" she said. "We raid the lions because that's what we *do*. Any leader who doesn't know that . . ."

"How dare—" Nosebiter began, but Hidetearer drew herself up taller and looked around at the rest of the gathered hyenas.

"I dare because I am concerned," she said stiffly, "for the direction of this clan and the safety of its hyenas."

"You got some of them *killed* today," spat Nosebiter.



“And Gutripper would never have blinked at that,” said Hidetearer. Breathstealer twitched at the mention of their mother, and Nosebiter’s eyes went wide, her pupils narrowing in anger. “Your judgment was to leave the lions alone,” Hidetearer went on. “But your judgment may be . . . impaired.” She looked around, and her gaze fell on Breathstealer, who stared back darkly.

*Be careful what you say here, Hidetearer, she thought.*

“It is not the hyena way to just leave lions to lick their wounds in peace,” Hidetearer continued. “I am not alone in thinking this.”

“So you challenge me? You want to fight me for the leadership, here and now?” Nosebiter said.

“No,” said Hidetearer. “Though I would not be afraid to, I do not think it would be a fair fight. Instead, my sisters and I suggest that you step down temporarily. So that you can enjoy your cubs in peace when they come.”

The intake of breath in the crowd sounded like the wind in the branches of the baobab tree.

*It’s a threat. They know she’s pregnant, and they’re threatening her cubs if she doesn’t step down.*

A dark anger swelled inside Breathstealer’s heart.

*I was going to give this traitor a chance, she thought. I came here with peace and mercy on my mind.*

*I can’t believe I was such a fool.*

“Leave my sight, Hidetearer,” said Nosebiter in a low growl. “Go to the males and tell them where you abandoned their brothers’ bodies, and then do not speak to me again until I call on you. If any of you would like to attack and murder me here and now,” she added, turning a challenging glare on the crowd, “I suggest you do it without hesitation. Otherwise, your blood is mine to drink, and I will hear no more of this from any of you.”

Several of the other hyenas immediately turned to leave, clearly relieved not to have to stay in this tense standoff. Some lingered longer, but it was immediately obvious none of them were about to try to come at their leader, so the argument fizzled out, the hyenas scattering slowly around their baobab or finding a shady spot to lie and lick their wounds.

Hidetearer paused the longest, but she too turned her back in the end and walked away.

It was only when they were alone that Nosebiter’s breath came a little faster, and as she gave a welcoming head bump to her sister’s shoulder

Breathstealer could feel her trembling. She had won this confrontation with words alone, but they both knew it was a truce that might not last. Hidetearer was cowed for now, but not placated. And Breathstealer had no doubt the Great Devourer had spoken the truth in Black Branches.

The impudent hyena would have to be dealt with, one way or another.



## 6

*Whisper stood under the glittering stars, her heart racing as she tried to sidle closer to the herd without drawing attention to herself. Buffalo were not really made to creep, but she did her best, trying to blend in with the buffalo at the edges of the herd. In a group this size, while the males and females were all traveling together, there was a good chance not every buffalo would recognize a stranger, even if they could see her clearly in the darkness. But then, she was not a stranger—she was one of their own, and she had made her presence very firmly felt before she left. . . .*

She made her way around the outskirts of the massed animals, toward the kopje just north of the watering hole. This was where the serval cat

Sunspot had told her Thunder would be, when she'd returned with the older buffalo's message. It had been hard to find any creature brave enough to walk among the buffalo, find Thunder, and relay Whisper's greetings, and she was very grateful to Sunspot for taking it on.

And sure enough, Thunder was there, trying to graze from the little grass that still sprouted around the very edges of a boulder at the base of the kopje.

"Hello, Thunder," Whisper said.

Thunder looked up at once, her eyes shining in the dark as she saw Whisper.

"Thank the Spirit," she said in a low voice. "I'm so glad to see you, my dear. Are you all right? What about Echo?"

"Echo's fine," Whisper told her. "And so is Quake."

Thunder snorted angrily. Whisper couldn't blame her—she had been Murmur's mother, as well as the most important part of Whisper and Echo's circle of foster mothers and adopted aunts, who had raised them both after their own mother died on the last migration. She decided not to mention Quake anymore if she could help it.

"How is the herd?" Whisper asked, though she suspected she could guess at the answer from the reports of the animals coming to speak to Great Mother Starlight—and sure enough, Thunder hung her head.

"In turmoil," she said. "As always, these days. We do not wish to turn creatures away from the water—but Holler insists, and we are thirsty too. There is little food. The sheer number of us keeps the worst of the predators away during the day, but at night the braver ones harry and pester us. If we don't migrate soon, I think half of us might starve to death, or get picked off . . . or even forget how, altogether. I wish you would come back."

Whisper tilted her head, surprised by this. "I don't think I can—Holler would kill Echo, wouldn't he?"

"Maybe," said Thunder weakly. "Maybe he would be merciful. After all, he's gotten everything he wanted."

"Do you think he feels like he's won?" Whisper wondered aloud. "I mean, he's got all the power, and for what? He must be getting hungry and thirsty too, or if he's not yet, he *must* understand that he will be soon. Does he just want to be the last buffalo standing when all the rest of Bravelands is just bones and sand?"

Thunder gave a shiver that rippled through the long hair on her sides. “He claims not to believe in the Way. He says the rains will come of their own accord, and it’ll prove he was right not to migrate, which he now says was his plan all along. And his cronies back him up, of course. Deep down . . . I can’t tell if he truly realizes this will kill him too, but he might believe it was still worth it, to hang on to the power he thinks is rightfully his.”

“All the more important for us to stop him, then,” Whisper said. “If he really can’t be reasoned with. There must be other buffalo who’d be willing to join us and get rid of him, or at least abandon him?”

Thunder frowned. “There are plenty who’d like to see the back of him, but not many who would dare challenge his authority. He’s breaking with all the buffalo ways—abandoning the weak, disrespecting the elderly, and buffalo who are caught spreading dissent against Holler find themselves isolated when the predators come. Everyone knows it’s happening, but while he still has a core of strong supporters, they’ll be too scared to fight it.”

“Is there anything you can do about them? His cronies? Surely *some* of them must be able to see this will end badly for them too?”

“I will do my best,” Thunder sighed. “But Holler already doesn’t trust me. If I put a hoof out of place, he’s liable to decide I’m more trouble than I’m worth, and then I can’t help you.”

“Well . . . then we just have to find a way to rally all the *other* buffalo,” said Whisper, feeling her pulse speed up as she searched for an upside, a way through this. “If enough of them pledge allegiance to Echo, it won’t matter how Holler threatens them, they’ll be able to just leave him behind.”

“I think you’ll struggle to convince them that Echo’s a better choice than Holler,” said Thunder. Whisper gave her a shocked look, her mouth dropping open.

“You can’t mean that!” she gasped. “He’s the chosen leader! Half the herd is plagued with flies because the oxpeckers have stayed loyal to him, that has to mean something!”

“It does,” said Thunder gently. “Of course it does. He’s the legitimate leader. But . . . has he found the Way?”

Whisper swallowed and said nothing.

“He’s still a calf, and a little one at that. Can you really see him leading the herd, Whisper? With no guidance from Bellow?”

Conflicting kneejerk responses warred inside Whisper's head for a moment. *Of course I can—he's the true leader, and my brother, I believe in him!* And *Of course I can't, he's my little brother, it wasn't so long ago I was having to watch him every moment to stop him being eaten by crocodiles, it'd be a disaster. . . .*

Deep down, what did she think? Could Echo lead? Could he make this right? Or more to the point, could he take care of a herd in crisis and keep them together until the Way was found?

She turned the questions over in her head and found her answer.

"He doesn't have Bellow, but he will have me," Whisper said. "And you, and any other sensible adult who cares to help him. So yes. I can see him leading, and I hope soon I will."

Thunder sighed again. "I wish . . ."

But she didn't have the chance to finish her wish, because a hooting cry went up from the buffalo on the edges of the herd.

"Lions! Form a circle, form the Shell!"

Whisper looked around, desperately trying to see where in the darkness the cry was coming from. She looked back the way she'd come, into the nighttime savannah, and then toward the shifting bulk of the herd.

"I should go," she said.

"On your own?" Thunder gasped. "Absolutely not! Come, huddle with us until the threat has passed. I'll hide you from prying eyes."

Whisper hesitated a moment longer. But if there were lions out there, a lone buffalo breaking from the herd would be exactly what they were hoping for. She had no choice. She had to go with Thunder.

They retreated, only just in time, hearing the yowling of predators and a bellow of anger and fear just behind them as they crowded together with the others. Another buffalo came charging out of the darkness, fear in his eyes and a scratch dribbling blood down his face, but still alive, and he almost trampled Whisper in his hurry to get back to the herd.

She tried to keep her head down and not draw attention as she backed into the crowd, facing out with Thunder beside her. She risked a glance around, looking for the largest buffalo to come and form the Shell, the protective ring of the strongest and biggest who would keep the weak and the small from being picked off by the lions.

A cluster of large females, and one or two confused-looking males, did emerge and stand stomping in the front line of buffalo. But it wasn't nearly

enough. Even in the dark, with the scent of fear rising all around her, Whisper could see that there were vulnerable buffalo left exposed in the gaps.

“Where’re Holler and the rest of the males?” she hissed to Thunder.

“They’re over there!” answered another buffalo. “They’re . . . they’re forming their own Shell!”

“*What?*” Thunder roared, and her cry of confusion was echoed all through the herd as they turned to look—most of them fruitlessly, in the darkness and the crush of bodies.

“Traitors!” one elderly buffalo cried out.

“They’ve taken Roar and Whistle in,” said a female bitterly. “And a few other of their *favorites*—and left all the rest of us out here to be picked off!”

Whisper felt panic reverberating through them, felt them begin to move apart, some of them even turning their backs on the darkness. There was a yowl and a scream from somewhere behind her.

If the herd completely lost their nerve now and scattered, it wouldn’t just be one or two of them lost to the lions. . . .

“To me!” she yelled over the commotion. “Form the Shell! We’ll do it ourselves. Biggest to the front, now, *do it!*”

“You heard! Get your hides out here!” Thunder repeated. “Whisper, get back.”

“I’m staying,” Whisper said. “I’ll be safe enough, if . . .”

*If anyone listens to me. And when did that last happen?*

Though it was a little slow and clumsy, a competent Shell did begin to form, the biggest females pushing to the front and the weak and the calves retreating farther in. A few of the males stood outside still, looking from their Shell to Holler’s. They tried to watch their own backs, but Whisper knew if they tried to make a dash for their leader and he didn’t let them in, they’d be finished. Other buffalo were still outside the Shell too, unfortunates who’d strayed too far—she couldn’t see them, but she could hear their hooves on the dry ground. They must be trying to avoid the lions, either running for their lives or trying to find a way back to the herd. . . .

She felt very small, standing between Thunder and the male buffalo who’d been clawed by the lions. His blood dripped onto the ground at his hooves, but he stood firm, snorting and pawing at the earth.

The darkness in front of Whisper shifted, a sinuous ripple of fur peeling out from the shadows and approaching, eyes glinting. A lioness, walking

calmly toward them.

“Greetings, young one,” she said. “I heard you give commands. Are you in charge, here?”

“No,” Whisper said.

“Then tell those who are,” the lion said, “we can wait all night for one of you to step out of line—or you can send out a calf. Just one juicy calf, and we’ll take it and go.” She licked her lips. “It’s up to you.”

A ripple of horror ran through the buffalo crowd. A few of them yelled defiance back at the lions, and Whisper was jostled from behind as a couple of calves whimpered and their aunts and mothers tried to shush them.

Whisper frowned. The lion spoke in a casual drawl, but her voice shook ever so slightly, and Whisper narrowed her eyes at the lion’s skinny, mangy shoulders.

“Get away from us,” she said, and lunged, head down, toward the lion. It scrambled away from her horns with a yelp.

“Whisper, be careful!” Thunder cried, and then all of a sudden, another lion voice split the darkness.

“Stragglers!” it roared, and the lioness spun on wobbly legs to look.

“After them!” she yowled.

Whisper looked out into the dark, searching the gloom for any sign of the buffalo the lions had spotted—and she saw them, dark shapes moving at a panicked gallop toward the herd. There were two large buffalo and, to Whisper’s horror, a calf trotting beside them. She could hear its gasping, high-pitched breaths as it struggled to keep up. The lions heard it too. Their pale tawny pelts were just streaks of gray on the gray earth as they loped toward the calf. Whisper watched, her heart breaking in achingly slow motion, as the buffalo came closer and closer and were not going to make it.

With a grunt of fury, Thunder suddenly moved. She broke from the line of the Shell, charging at the approaching buffalo. Before Whisper could breathe in to tell her not to go, Thunder had put her own body between the lions and the little cub. The stragglers met the herd with a clatter of hooves and horns, the calf slipping in last and the Shell closing around them.

But Thunder was trapped outside, and she was alone.

“No!” Whisper screamed as the lions leaped on her. She stood firm for a furious moment, tossing her horns, stamping and snorting. A lion went flying, striking the ground with a pained yelp—but then Thunder’s knees buckled, and she was sinking under the tide of claws and teeth. “No,



Thunder!” Whisper yelled and took a step forward to rush to her friend’s side—but the injured male put his horns in front of her.

“It’s too late,” he said. “Don’t give them two meals for no reason.”

“Think of Echo,” said another buffalo, who Whisper hadn’t realized had recognized her. “He needs you.”

Whisper strained against them, but only weakly. She heard a few more low, sad grunts and moans from Thunder, and then there was only silence, the breathing of the buffalo, and the sound of lions feasting.

“Get back,” said the injured male. “We have a Shell, thanks to you. Go to the middle. You don’t have to watch this.”

Whisper nodded dumbly and let herself be gently shoved and jostled back behind several buffalo.

She stood there among the rest, hardly aware of time, until the sky began to glow gray-blue and the stars faded away. She stood in silence, looking down at her hooves, ignoring any buffalo who tried to talk to her. At one point, the calf who’d been saved by Thunder came to stand beside her and tried to catch her eye, but she couldn’t look. She wanted to be able to tell it that she knew Thunder had died doing the right thing, that she would have done the same, that the calf shouldn’t feel bad. She could find the words in her mind, but not in her mouth, or in her heart.

The herd finally began to shuffle and spread out, just as the fire of dawn spread out over the eastern horizon, like blood seeping into water.

“I see the traitor Thunder is dead,” said a voice eventually—a sneering, familiar voice that made Whisper’s hackles rise. She stomped her hooves and shook her head, trying to loosen her stiff muscles before he reached her. Holler shoved his way through the buffalo he had abandoned, and most of them got out of his way with deference, or at least with a nervous shuffle, as if he hadn’t left them to die.

“And I thought I heard—ah. Whisper. There you are.”

The massive male walked up to her, and his horns cast long shadows over her face as he leaned down and spoke, in a voice loud enough for the buffalo around her to hear him clearly.

“That’s another hard loss for you, isn’t it?” he said. “But the herd is better off without Thunder. And without you, too. I hope you didn’t come here hoping to be welcomed back.”

Whisper narrowed her eyes at him, feeling her nostrils flare. Her breath felt heavy and painful in her throat.

She could confront him here, call out his crimes, just to make sure *someone* remembered that he was the traitor here, not Thunder, that she had made her own choice to risk death to save a calf while he hid behind his cronies.

But what would be the point? The others were too scared to look him in the eye, let alone stand up against him.

She shook her head. "I'm going," she said.

"Don't tread on the remains on your way out," Holler said. Whisper shuddered at the cruelty of it but held his gaze. "And give our best wishes to Echo, won't you?"

Whisper stumbled dizzily away, feeling as if her limbs were twisted and knotted up with grief and rage. She avoided the spot where Thunder had fallen, already teeming with vultures, but as she went she heard the laughter of Holler and his friends following her, nipping at her heels like a pack of hyenas.

*I'll be back, she thought. I'll finish you someday, Holler, I swear I will.*

But her voice sounded hollow in her own head.



*Breathstealer* had turned to go so abruptly that she had almost walked right into Stride and Stonehide, who'd been listening, barely even hidden. They had been very lucky that she had been preoccupied with—well, Stride could only guess at what was going on in the hyena's brain, but whatever it was, it'd distracted her enough that she didn't catch them splashing into a patch of reeds and sinking down into the swampy water in an attempt to stay hidden. She passed them, the insects trailing after her, and vanished into the trees.

"Do we follow?" Stonehide muttered.

“I think we should head back and tell Starlight about this,” Stride murmured back. “Although exactly what she’s going to make of it, I don’t know.”

They waited for a little while longer, until Breathstealer and her attendant buzzing cloud had passed out of earshot, and then Stride stood up and shook himself, spattering the surface of the water—and Stonehide—with murky droplets.

“Thanks for that,” Stonehide snarled. “What was all that, anyway? What’s wrong with that hyena? Does she have maggots in the brain? I’ve heard that can happen when all you eat is rot-meat.”

Stride shuddered. “I don’t know—but I’m not sure it adds up to some grand plan of the Great Devourer, to be honest. Rambling to herself about a threat to her clan, and whether she should kill someone or other . . . and then just going silent like that. It’s not exactly Titan the spirit-eater, you know?”

“Sure,” said Stonehide. “But Great Mother said to follow her, and you’ve got to admit it’s not normal hyena behavior.”

“Who knows?” said Stride. “Maybe they all come here to talk to themselves, get covered in insects, and stare into space? No, I guess not,” he added as Stonehide gave him a skeptical wrinkling of his muzzle.

“Let’s get out of here,” Stonehide said.

“Now that’s a plan,” Stride agreed. “I hate this place. I feel as if it’s . . . infested, down to the very roots.”

They put the bent, clawlike tree at their backs and headed back in the direction they had come. They climbed out of the slick muddy water, and Stride scented around, trying to find his own scent or Stonehide’s, hoping to follow their own trail back out of this place. But there was no sign of it. Or perhaps the stink of the swamp had just crawled inside Stride’s nose, and now he couldn’t smell anything but that scent of rot and mud and stagnant water. He sighed, squinting up at the canopy, where there was not a glimpse of sky to be seen, not even a sense of the shadows to help them navigate.

“We’ll find our way,” Stonehide said firmly, correctly guessing at Stride’s thoughts. “We know it’s somewhere over there. Just keep walking and don’t go in circles, and we’ll be out in no time.”

“That’s right,” said Stride, more confidently than he felt.

The forest seemed to do all it could to worry and disorient him as they walked. Oddly repetitive patterns of vine and spiderweb, totally unfamiliar

slopes and hollows, and the insistent buzzing of the insects all around them made Stride hesitant and slowed their progress. But they pressed on.

They emerged in time at a depressed patch of ground, a little more open than the rest of the forest—not quite a clearing, thanks to the dark tangle of canopy above that seemed to reach and weave together intentionally to keep the sun out. There were a scattering of trees pushing up through the damp moss and oily pools, but none of their branches reached the green roof—Stride realized they were all dead and decaying, trunks leaning slumped against one another. They formed a creepy circle around the middle of the hollow, and Stride was about to suggest they back up and make their way around the lip of it instead of going down and through—but then something caught his eye. A patch of darkness.

He stared, stumbling to a halt. What was it about that darkness that drew his eye and held his gaze? It was just a hole in the ground, a small cave or burrow surrounded by vines. But it looked *wrong*, too dark, too out of place. There were no rocks nearby to form a cave, no tree roots to shelter a burrow, but that wasn't it. It just didn't *fit* somehow.

"Those meerkats said something about tunnels, didn't they?" he muttered to Stonehide.

"Did they?" said the honey badger. He scratched under his chin with one long claw. "Hmm. Something about tunnels that . . . eat you? Am I remembering that right?"

"Can you see that down there? That opening, between those vines?"

"What," said Stonehide with a nervous scoff, "that weird hole in the ground in the middle of the ring of dead trees in the creepy forest where Death might be living? *That* hole? Yeah, I see it. Now let's *go*."

"I think I should look closer," Stride said, and he heard his small companion give a half growl, half sigh.

"Of course you do," Stonehide said.

"We want to be able to tell Starlight everything we can, right?" Stride went on.

"I want to get out of here as fast as my little legs can carry me," said Stonehide. "But go, if you're going, I'll keep watch out here."

Stride nodded. He felt a strange release, as if he'd been holding his breath trying *not* to turn and walk down into the hollow, and now he'd let go and his paws were walking him through the dead trees toward the tunnel without him telling them to.

*That's probably not good*, he thought. But the stronger and stranger the feeling was, the more sure he was that he needed to be able to tell the Great Mother about it. . . .

He left his companion to approach the strange opening.

The vines that crawled around the mouth of the tunnel were thick and green, glistening with damp, a vibrant contrast to the blackness inside and the decayed gray trunks of the trees all around. Stride shuddered as he stepped over and between them, imagining them snaking up to wind around him, strangle him, and drag him into the dark.

The inside of the tunnel was wet. Stride stuck his nose inside and took a sniff. There was the same scent of rot that had been in the swamp, but the smell was less startling than the sudden damp chill that puckered his nose. The wet sides of the burrow were covered in something cold . . . it should have been mud, but it felt wrong. It felt . . . *slimier*.

A jolt of disgust and fear ran through his pelt as his front paws skidded deeper into the hole. Though Stride tried to pull away, trying to brace against the slippery surface, he couldn't seem to stop himself.

"Stride?" called Stonehide.

"No," he muttered, then louder, "No!"

There was a pressure in his head, through his rising panic. He could feel his blood thumping in his neck, and for a horrible moment, in the darkness, he thought of a swallowing throat, a long and fleshy passage down into the bowels of some giant creature . . . and he also thought of the shadow that chased after cheetahs who ran too fast, the shadow that had caught and killed Flicker.

And then the pressure eased, and he just felt freezing cold, stumbling to a stop as his paws were freed from the strange compulsion to move forward. He panted, the chill air almost burning as he breathed it in and looked around.

The space was dark but not pitch-black. He could see no source of light, but he could still make out a branching tunnel ahead, at least three ways to go, and hints of more hollows and tunnels beyond. He looked over his shoulder and saw that the way he had come in was shrouded in deep, deep darkness, as if he'd passed through something to come into this place. The way out looked steep but not impassable.

It did not feel good to be here. A feeling of nausea and weakness flowed into him, as if his strength was being slowly drained through his paws

where they touched the cold ground.

"All right," he muttered, shuddering. "Great, that's plenty, goodbye." He turned to leave, to climb out. Despite not wanting to go back to that slimy squeezing place, it was better than being trapped here in the freezing earth with the odd gray light that came from nowhere. Then, from behind, he heard something. A soft rustling, like wind in dry leaves, and then a whisper of a voice.

"Stride . . . ?"

He wasn't alone, and what's more, he *knew* that voice. It made his heart swoop.

"Flicker?" he gasped.

"Stride," she said again.

He squinted. "Where are you?"

Was *this* the realm of the Great Devourer? Was that constricting passage a gateway into another world? Could it be that simple? Was she really *here*?

"Flicker," he called again. "Is that you? Say something!"

"Stride . . ."

The voice came louder and clearer than before, but his pricking ears couldn't make out from which direction it had come. He took a hesitant step, listening. In the back of his mind, he knew it was a terrible idea to walk away from the entrance to this place. He could get lost in these tunnels, take a wrong turn; maybe they would even change behind him and trap him here. . . .

But he couldn't turn away from Flicker any more than he could grow wings and fly.

"Stride . . . , " said the voice once more, and this time it seemed farther away. A shudder of horror spurred Stride's paws into motion.

"I'm coming," he said. "Wait for me, Flicker!"

He scrambled down the left tunnel as fast as he could in this enclosed space. Beyond the opening there was more tunnel, almost identical to the previous one. He followed the voice to another branch, another turning, leading ever downward. At last, beyond a sharp bend to the right, he saw it—a dark shadow, crouching in a hollow, moving up and down like a panting creature.

"Flicker?" he called.

The shadow moved, shifted . . . unfurled, and disintegrated.

It was not Flicker.

A dense mound of scurrying beetles turned thousands of glittering carapaces toward him. Wings buzzed, mandibles snapped.

*“Stride?”* it said again, and now its voice sounded like a mockery of Flicker’s, her tone still clearly audible among the chittering buzzing sounds. *“Stay with us, Stride!”*

They swarmed him, flying at his face and skittering across the ground toward his paws. He recoiled and let out a yowl of horror as the insects covered his face, his body, crawling in his fur, tiny legs wriggling in his ears and across his muzzle.

He managed to turn around, wincing and shuddering as he stood on more insects and they crunched and shifted under his paws, making the ground itself seem insubstantial. He scrambled away, colliding with the walls of the tunnel as he ricocheted around the corner, shaking his head to try to dislodge the beetles still clinging to his fur. He veered right and then left, and his throat closed with panic as he realized just how quickly he had lost track of the way he had come. . . .

*“Stride! Mate, you alive in there?”*

Stride jumped at Stonehide’s voice and cast a desperate look behind him. A black, swarming cloud still chased after him up the tunnel. Stonehide sounded like he was on Stride’s right now. But was it really him? Or would he run right into another cloud of buzzing insects?

*I’ll take my chances!*

He threw himself right at the next opening and charged up a slope and around another bend—and there was the dark entrance, the one he had come in through, pulsing horribly just ahead.

*“I’m not coming in there after you.”* Stonehide’s voice echoed from the other side, wonderfully real and full of wry gruffness.

*“Stand back, I’m coming out!”* Stride yelled, plunging headlong into the darkness.

The same awful squeezing, squelching feeling ran all down Stride’s body, and the vivid shadow in his head pulsated—he hadn’t imagined the feeling could be much worse, but then he hadn’t imagined passing through it while his fur was still crawling with bugs.

He burst into the forest hollow, deliciously bright after the grim, underground gloom, crashing into Stonehide. He rolled over and over in the mossy earth, splashing in oozy mud puddles and scratching and scratching at his ears and his shoulders with his back legs. Beetles dropped from him,



but to Stride's wild relief, they didn't seem to be *after* him anymore—the bugs fell to the ground and rolled or crawled away or got stuck wiggling in the mud, just like a pawful of ordinary insects, not some terrible, teasing, Flicker-impersonating swarm.

Stonehide leaped on him, batting and clawing the insects out of his fur, and at last he felt almost free of them—he could still feel their tiny legs crawling over his back, tickling his ears, but when he frantically pawed at himself there was nothing there.

“What happened down there?” Stonehide asked.

“Let's go,” Stride said. “Let's get out of here, I'll tell you when we're out of sight of that . . . thing.”

“Suit yourself,” Stonehide said.

They ran from the clearing, Stride forcing himself not to break into a sprint so that Stonehide could keep up. He twitched every so often, *still* convinced there was a beetle crawling over him, trying to burrow under his skin.

“So,” Stonehide panted, when the canopy finally began to glow with green-gold light as it thinned a little, and they glimpsed the burning orange plain through the trees ahead. “What happened? You were down there for ages, and then what . . . some kind of beetle nest?”

“No,” said Stride. “It was . . .” He hesitated. He couldn't seem to find the words for the feeling he'd had in the tunnels, and the ones he could find were so bizarre that he found himself reluctant to say them out loud. “It felt like being . . . *eaten*. And then it was freezing cold. I could see, but everything was gray, and . . . and I thought I heard Flicker, but it was those insects.”

“Sorry?” Stonehide said.

“They were . . . *talking*. Insects can't talk,” Stride conceded. “But these ones did, or . . . or *something* did . . . it sounded like Flicker, and then it turned into beetles. . . .”

Stonehide gave him a horrified, disgusted look.

“I . . . I think it was some kind of . . . *other* place,” Stride went on. “Not a *real* place.”

“The beetles seemed real,” Stonehide grumbled.

Stride shuddered, dancing a few steps backward as his paws shook themselves without his permission. “We should tell Great Mother about it,” he said, “And then never, ever come back to this place. Ever again.”





*Breathstealer was disgusted. She'd expected Hidetearer to come back and fight Nosebiter, or maybe gather a gang of traitors and force her to leave. She hadn't thought that Hidetearer would be such a coward as to do this.*

Quietly, and without anyone so much as growling in Nosebiter's direction, she had been sidelined in her own pack. First in small ways, too small for Nosebiter to challenge them directly. Hyenas had brought problems to Hidetearer, or they spoke to her first when they had news. Nothing ostentatious, and originally it was only the usual suspects, Hidetearer's allies and friends. But slowly it had escalated to become more widespread and undeniable.

Nosebiter no longer ate first. That was the real, incontrovertible indignity. And Hidetearer had been clever—it was never *she* who took the first bite. Over days, every time there was prey and Nosebiter should have been allowed to eat her fill, another, different hyena stuck their neck out and sank in their teeth. Nosebiter snapped and bit and shouted at them, but every meal, another would make the insult and take the punishment. Breathstealer could feel her sister's authority eroding from underneath her like the dry bank of a flooding river. The last one she had fought until they were both bloodied, despite the risk to the cub growing in her belly.

And yet, it was happening again. Earchewer had gone for the first bite, and to Breathstealer's horror, Nosebiter barely touched her, batting across her shoulder with a cursory swipe of her claws. Other hyenas moved in, forcing Nosebiter out, keeping her from eating until she forced her way in, snarling with fury and shame.

Breathstealer growled deep in her chest and tried to muscle her way to her sister's side, but she was blocked at every turn, until finally Hidetearer herself spoke up.

"Why don't you eat the tail," she sneered. "That's your favorite part, right, *Tailgrabber*?"

Breathstealer's hackles rose, and she stared at the other hyena. "Say that again."

"Do you want to do this?" Hidetearer said, getting to her paws. "I've had my fill after all, wouldn't you rather wait till you've eaten the scraps we leave for you? Come and take me on, if your Great Devourer will give you the courage."

*That's it. I've had enough.* Breathstealer lifted a paw to walk toward Hidetearer, but her sister turned from the stringy antelope meat and fixed her gaze on Breathstealer.

"Not now," said Nosebiter quietly.

"But—"

"Not now," Nosebiter repeated.

"Listen to your big sister, *Tailgrabber*," said Hidetearer with unbearable smugness.

Breathstealer gave Nosebiter a long look. She couldn't say it in front of Hidetearer and the others, but she tried to convey through a single stare that surely taking this from Hidetearer was just as dangerous as stepping up and fighting. *If we don't challenge her, we look weak, and we lose control*

*altogether! I know you're carrying a cub, but you have to understand that. . . . I always thought you were the one who'd inherited Gutripper's killer instinct, not me. . . .*

But Nosebiter regarded her with a steady gaze, and Breathstealer knew that her sister couldn't hear her thoughts.

Her stare swung back to Hidetearer for an angry moment, and Hidetearer giggled to herself.

Breathstealer sat down. She didn't even try to eat. She just sat beside her sister, trembling with anger, daring any other hyena to make so much as a snide comment. Eventually, the giggles died down and the others all focused on tearing the antelope apart. Breathstealer's stomach rumbled, but her pride wouldn't let her try again to join the others. She waited in furious silence until the antelope had been picked almost clean, and Hidetearer and her friends had wandered off. At last she felt she could leave without losing face or leaving Nosebiter too exposed, and she stalked away without a word to her sister. She could have stayed to hash it out—but what would be the point? She knew what had to happen. At a time that made sense, without putting either of them in danger, Hidetearer had to die.

She walked out over the plain, even though leaving the shadow of the baobab meant stepping into an afternoon sunlight so searingly hot it made the skin on her nose wrinkle and her breath come in shallow pants.

"Great Devourer," she muttered aloud. It felt strange at first, to send her thoughts out into the burning sun, when the Devourer had chosen the dark, dank swamp as their meeting place—but the sun could kill, as surely as the water, and she stared into the light until spots danced in front of her eyes. "You were right. She has to go. I'll follow your lead; show me her death and I'll make sure it finds her."

The swirling dots in front of her vision seemed to move strangely, and she was briefly overcome with horror, thinking some kind of insect had infected her own eyes—but it wasn't actually inside her, it was right in front of her. She began to hear buzzing, and realized what she was seeing was a small swarm of small, pale-bodied insects with long wings and red-tinged heads. What were they? She didn't recognize them until she had followed the dancing fliers to their source—a bent tree, dried up, probably dead, leaning over the corpse of a zebra. But the insects weren't swarming on the dead creature: or rather, they were crawling over its blank eyes and lolling

tongue, but the majority of them were running in and out of holes in the ground and in the tree itself.

*Termites! Breathstealer realized. That's what these are. They're not that interested in the meat, they're busy eating the dying tree. . . .*

Oddly, the zebra wasn't visibly wounded. In fact, it looked like the zebra had simply lain down and died, and quite recently too, since it wasn't crawling with maggots yet. And evidently no other scavenging creature had discovered the corpse.

*Wandered away from its herd in search of water, Breathstealer wondered, and expired before it found any?*

Her mouth began to salivate. She thought of the antelope she hadn't eaten and the pride she'd refused to swallow, and she licked her muzzle and leaned in to tear into the thin but fresh zebra meat.

The buzzing of the termites intensified, and a small flock of the winged ones flew into her eyes, making her recoil.

"No?" she said, a trail of drool running down her chin. "Then what? I'll need my strength if I'm going to challenge her. . . ."

The Great Devourer's voice sounded all around her, throbbing in her head, and the sun in the sky almost seemed to pulsate with it, as if it had heard her thoughts about its deadly heat.

*"It is not for you, child. Not yet. Bring her here."*

The termites flew out of Breathstealer's face and rejoined their colony, which began to vanish, pale bodies squeezing into a crack in the tree that Breathstealer saw ran all the way from the roots to about halfway up the trunk. When they had all wriggled their way in, it was so small it was almost invisible.

Her heart hammering and her mouth still watering, Breathstealer turned from the zebra corpse and began to trot back toward the baobab.

She knew she couldn't just tell Hidetealer to follow her. That would be instantly suspicious.

She broke into a run. She should be out of breath when she got back. It had to seem like she had something urgent to share, something important.

It felt odd to be plotting like this, relying on cunning and trickery—and it felt exhilarating too. She let it reflect in her body, in the way she gasped as she ran up to Nosebiter and spoke, in a voice she tried to pitch as both under her breath and loud enough for the others to hear clearly.

“Nosebiter, I’ve found food,” she said. She pointed with her nose, holding it a little too long, making sure she’d been seen. “A whole zebra, near a dying tree over in that direction. Quick, before Hidetearer and her lot get it!”

Nosebiter got to her paws, a hopeful look in her eyes. Breathstealer knew she’d have to explain the truth somehow, but if Nosebiter believed, surely the others would too. . . .

She looked around, saw another hyena’s ears prick up, but Hidetearer wasn’t paying attention. Her stomach pinched and rumbled, and she hoped it sounded like hunger.

“Let’s go,” Breathstealer said, raising her voice just a little, desperately hoping she wasn’t making herself too obvious. “You can actually eat first for a change!”

Hidetearer’s ears twitched, and Breathstealer’s heart skipped a beat. Her enemy stood, walked over to one of her cronies, and exchanged a few words—then without so much as a pause to sneer and gloat at Nosebiter, a group of them set off at a run, in the direction Breathstealer had pointed.

“*Hidetearer*,” Nosebiter snarled. “Of *course* she heard. Why didn’t you keep your voice down, Breathstealer?”

“We should follow her,” said Breathstealer quietly. “Don’t worry. This is what I was hoping for.”

Nosebiter’s frown of annoyance shifted to one of deep suspicion. “What are you up to?” she whispered.

“Follow my lead,” Breathstealer said. “Yell at her, if you want—but don’t get too close.”

Nosebiter’s eyes narrowed, but she turned to run after Hidetearer, baring her teeth in a snarl, and Breathstealer fell in a pace behind her. They chased after the other hyenas across the hot and empty plain, until Breathstealer knew Hidetearer and her friend had spotted the dying tree and the zebra corpse—they veered toward it and sped up.

There were more hyenas at their heels too, some Hidetearer’s supporters, but more of them hyenas who Breathstealer suspected were unwilling to throw their lot in with either their weakened current leader or their obnoxious aspiring one. Hunger drove them, of course, but there was some greater excitement in the air, as if everyone knew in their blood that the conflict between leader and pretender was about to come to a head.

Good, Breathstealer thought. *Let there be plenty of witnesses. Let them see what happens. . . .*

Hidetearer halted as she reached the zebra, standing over it with victory gleaming in her eyes. "Stay back, Nosey," she sneered as Nosebiter drew close.

"Not too close," Breathstealer whispered in her sister's ear, eyeing the tree, its bent and bare branches, and the near-invisible crack where the termites had burrowed in. . . .

Nosebiter trotted to a stop and stood, staring down her rival.

"That's my prey by right," Nosebiter said. "I am your leader. A *loyal* hyena found it and brought the news to me."

"Your *soft sister* found it," said Hideteaser with a mocking laugh. "And she should have eaten it herself if she'd been a true hyena, instead of taking pity on a weak and pointless mother-to-be. If she doesn't want it, *I'll* take it."

"Eat that zebra," Breathstealer said, "and the Great Devourer will punish you for your treachery, and every other hyena who dares to undermine Nosebiter's rule."

Hidetearer hesitated, and Breathstealer felt like her heart might leap from her throat, exhilaration washing through her at the drama of it all, and then the sickly undercurrent of knowing that she might have gone too far and made Hideteaser suspicious. . . .

But then Hideteaser laughed again, a cackling giggle that rang across the plain, and sank her teeth into the zebra's hide.

As she ripped into the corpse, spilling dark oozing blood out over its black-and-white flank, there was a strange sensation in the air. The tree branches rustled, as if stirred by the wind, yet there hadn't been even the slightest breeze so far that day. Breathstealer's hairs stood on end, and she took half a step back, nudging Nosebiter to move with her.

Hidetearer was oblivious, tearing a strip of flesh from the zebra's hide, holding it up with a bloodied grin, even as the rustling grew louder, and the tiny crack in the trunk began to splinter. Termites swarmed out of thousands of holes in the wood, and it began to topple. By the time Hideteaser had noticed the shifting of the shadows over her head, it was too late. With a creak and a splintering crunch, the trunk broke above her, the top section crashing down. Hideteaser made a desperate leap, squealing in panic, but



the branches caught her midair, smothering her body and that of the zebra. Her cry was silenced instantly.

The other hyenas backed off as one as the leaves settled, but Earchewer was the first to edge closer, and then others followed.

“Hidetearer?” mumbled Earchewer.

Hidetearer was visible, but as she moved weakly, the extent of her injuries became apparent. At least one branch had impaled her belly. Her paws scrabbled for purchase, but she couldn’t get free.

Breathstealer stood back and watched as others made a token effort to clear a path through the foliage. But it was obviously of no use. The injured hyena managed to turn her head weakly, her breath already gargled, and looked across at Breathstealer with a pitiful horror in her eyes. Then they rolled back in her head, and her body went limp.

The other hyenas stared in silence for a long moment. A few of them let out keening whimpers, but one by one, all of them turned to look at Breathstealer.

She tried to conceal her shock and her horror, even though she’d known, in theory at least, what would happen. The others regarded her with fear, uncertainty.

*Maybe I’ve gone too far. Hyenas have always fought each other—but is this different?*

Would they turn on her, she wondered.

But she found she wasn’t afraid. Why would she be? The Great Devourer stood with her, the burning sun at her back casting ever darker shadows ahead. Her pulse had steadied now, and she felt a cold determination in the depths of her stomach.

“Hidetearer has perished, according to her name,” she said. “She questioned the power of the Great Devourer, and Nosebiter as our true leader. Would any of you like to do the same?”

She felt the Devourer’s approval in her bones. No one made a move for the zebra carcass. That was the strangest thing. Normally there was nothing that could keep a hyena from a meal. Instead, they looked uncertainly between the corpse, her and her sister, and she understood that they were waiting for permission. And turning to Nosebiter, Breathstealer saw that she too was looking in her direction.

She could feel a surge of power in her paws, the rush of control that she’d always guessed the clan’s leader must feel, but even more potent. She

felt the fate of Bravelands tremble under her paws, like a trapped prey animal, baring its throat to her. A small smile twitched across her face.

*Its blood is mine to drink.*

“Eat your fill,” she said. “And thank the Great Devourer for this blessing.”

With howls of delight, the hyenas set about dragging the zebra from the branches, Hidetearer’s demise already forgotten.



*“It’s my fault Thunder’s dead,” Echo said in a very small, very miserable voice.*

*“No!” Whisper said.*

*“Not even a little bit,” Quake echoed her.*

Whisper’s heart broke all over again for her little brother. It had been a few days since she had returned with the news about Thunder. He’d barely said a word since, growing quieter and more withdrawn, until one morning Whisper had been unable to find him anywhere. In a panic, she’d grabbed Quake and told him that he was going to help search for her brother. They’d found him in the end, sitting beneath a tree, all alone, curled up with his

chin resting on the ground. Whisper had been worried he was hurt or sick, but at last he had lifted his head and leaned his forehead against hers and made his tiny, sad confession.

"This is Holler's doing," Quake told Echo firmly. "He closed off the Shell and left the others outside."

"That's right," said Whisper. "He forced Thunder to choose whether to give her life or let the calf die. She chose bravely, but make no mistake, it was Holler's fault."

"But . . ." Echo's eyes screwed tight shut with misery. "But if I'd just . . . if the oxpeckers had picked someone else . . ."

"You couldn't control that," Whisper said, "but Holler *could* control how he reacted. Nobody forced him to go completely wild with stolen power."

"I just wish there was something I could *do*," Echo said. "But what can we do to stop him?"

"Let's go back to Starlight's clearing," said Whisper gently. "Perhaps she will have found something out that will help us."

Echo nodded, and Whisper felt guilty. She carried almost no hope that Great Mother Starlight would have anything helpful to say—it was just something for Echo to do that wasn't lying under a tree feeling miserable. She avoided Quake's eyes as they walked, certain that he probably felt the same as she did.

The clearing was just as busy as it had been for days, a new procession of aggrieved and desperate creatures begging the Great Mother for guidance she simply didn't have to give. The drought was a quandary she couldn't solve. At least, that was what Whisper assumed as she settled down in a spot at the edge of the clearing to listen to the discussion in progress. But it wasn't quite the same story that she had heard dozens of times in the last few days, of buffalo driving other creatures away from the watering hole and predators picking them off as they searched for something to quench their thirst.

"Her leg is broken," said a giraffe, his long neck swaying sadly as he bent to talk to Starlight. "She can't reach the high branches, we're having to try to pull them down for her, and there isn't much left to start with. . . ."

"I'm afraid a giraffe with a broken leg isn't really an issue the Great Parent can help with," interjected Grass, Starlight's baboon second-in-command.

“I know that,” snapped the giraffe. “Sorry, Great Mother,” he added. “It’s not the injury that I wanted to talk about, it’s *how* it happened. Her hoof slipped into a crack in the earth—not one of the small ones that you can see everywhere these days, one at least as wide as a tree branch, and it just appeared from nowhere. As if . . . as if there was a great hole right below us, with a thin crust of earth over the top, and it had just crumbled away.”

Starlight nodded slowly. “This is not the first such story I have heard,” she said. That surprised Whisper—she hadn’t heard of cracks like this before, not ones large enough to fall into.

“That’s not all,” the giraffe said. “There was this smell from the earth. It smelled like . . . rot-meat, but if there was something dead down there, it must have been massive, because however hard we looked we couldn’t see where it was coming from. And we heard this noise, like an animal dying. Slowly. It was horrible. We had to prop Farseer up so she could walk on three legs until we got away from that place, we couldn’t bear to stay, or leave her there, with that sound.”

Whisper looked at Starlight for her reaction to this story. Grass was staring at the giraffe with an expression of distaste clearly written across his baboon face, but Starlight remained more impassive.

“Thank you for telling me,” she said. “You did the right thing, moving Farseer away from it and coming here to let me know.”

“What do you think it was?” the giraffe said. “Should we be . . . I don’t know . . . trying to fill it in with twigs or rocks or something?”

“I suspect it will resist any efforts to fill it in,” said Starlight. “Avoid it, as your instincts told you to. I . . . I don’t know what it is exactly, but I think you were right to follow your instincts. Avoid it and tell others to do the same.”

“All right,” said the giraffe, his eyes widening. “I will. Thank you, Great Mother.”

The giraffe left, ducking his head low to fit through the elephants’ tree tunnel.

“Great Mother needs a short break,” Grass announced as the next petitioner slunk up toward her. It was a skinny-looking male lion, and he paused respectfully, settling down in the dry grass to wait, cleaning behind his ears with his paws.

Starlight walked a little way from her spot by the big rock, stretching her trunk, wiggling her ears. She passed near the three buffalo and paused.

“How are you, Echo?” she asked, gently reaching to pat him on the head with her trunk.

Echo opened his mouth to answer, but all that came out was a small, choked squeak.

“Ah,” said Starlight kindly. She left her trunk resting on his head for a moment, and Echo sighed. Whisper thought he seemed comforted, despite everything.

“Starlight,” Whisper said at last. “We can’t just keep waiting for things to get better. Do you have *any* idea what we can do about Holler? About the rains?”

“I . . . ,” Starlight said hesitantly, and Whisper winced. That meant *no*. “The vultures tell me there will be true chaos if this doesn’t end soon. Animals are talking of trying to *fight* the buffalo, leading some kind of great war against Holler—I can’t blame them, but I do not think it will work, and it would lead to bloodshed we haven’t seen since the days of Grandmother’s poison.”

Whisper frowned. “Would it be such a terrible idea?” she muttered. “I know a lot of animals would die . . . but a lot of us will die, anyway. Doesn’t there come a point when it’s our only option?”

“War is *never* our only option,” Starlight said firmly.

Whisper didn’t reply, because she couldn’t think of anything to say other than what she was really thinking: *If there is another way, why aren’t you doing anything?*

“Starlight, has Thunder’s spirit gone to the stars?” Echo spoke up suddenly. “Or do you think it’s gone to the . . . the other place?”

Starlight’s face twitched with surprise.

“I’ve been paying attention,” Echo said in a small, reproachful voice. “I’m supposed to be the leader, and as—as stupid as that is, I can’t change it, so I’ve got to know what’s going on. Spirits are going to somewhere bad. Thunder’s gone there too, hasn’t she?”

“Oh, Echo,” said Starlight. “The honest answer is, I don’t know. I can’t be sure. But I fear you’re right. I have sent the cheetah Stride, and his honey badger friend, to follow the Devourer’s chosen and try to bring news of its plans. We will see what they have to say. And Echo—it is *not* stupid for you to be the buffalo leader. Not at all.”

“If they’d just picked Holler in the first place,” Echo said with a cold determination, “he would have had the Way, led the migration, the rains would have come, and none of this would be happening.”

“No,” said Starlight gently. “It wouldn’t. Something else would, and I believe that it would have been *worse*. Echo . . . if this is the path the Great Spirit has chosen for us, imagine just how *much* worse it would have been in that other world, where another buffalo was chosen.”

“I . . . I didn’t think of that,” Echo said.

“The Great Spirit makes its presence known, truly known, in so few ways,” Starlight said. “And it chose you. It chose this fate, as painful as it is. If you doubt yourself, try to imagine why it did so.” She blinked slowly and leaned her head down close to him, lowering her voice. “That’s what I do when I doubt its wisdom in choosing me.”

Echo’s eyes went wide and shining, and he nodded.

“This . . . Devourer’s chosen, the hyena,” Whisper asked. “What do you think she’s doing? Is she really so important?”

“She could be,” said Starlight. “If she turns her whole clan to the service of the Great Devourer, they could be a force for great evil. The Devourer has no host in this world, as the Great Spirit has the Great Parent. If it had one, with an army at their back . . .” She shook her head. “The hyena Breathstealer is *not* an evil creature. She will not go easily into the darkness. But she *will* go, if the Devourer gets its claws too deep into her, and once it has paws on the earth of Bravelands, it will be much harder to ever banish again. It will be like a fierce wind that scours life from the savannah with its insatiable appetite.”

All of a sudden, a great hooting and yelling went up from the crowd behind them. Voices cried out “No!” and “Not him!” Whisper looked up, and her heart dropped into her hooves as she heard stomping in dry leaves, almost feeling it in the earth. There was a confusion of scrambling and growling as some animals scattered away from the tree tunnel and others closed in, baring teeth and claws at Holler and the two other male buffalo who were flanking him.

For a moment, Whisper felt a burst of excitement. Surely he shouldn’t have come here without his massive herd of loyal buffalo—the predators here could take him down, if they all worked together, and if Starlight was willing to get her trunk dirty. . . .

But then she shook herself. It was deeply tempting, but she knew it couldn't be. It might even, debatably, be within the Code for the animals here to remove this terror, which stood between them and survival. But Starlight would never allow it.

*And do I really want to be part of something like that?*

No, of course not. Her own eagerness to kill him and be done with it made her feel queasy.

"Let me through, you ridiculous creatures," Holler boomed. "I only want to speak to the Great Mother, as is my right, as much as yours."

"Get in line!" a small voice chirped back, to a peal of nervous laughter.

"Echo, you two, you should make yourselves scarce," said Starlight urgently. "Let me handle this."

"He won't harm us here," said Quake, but Whisper nudged him.

"She's right. Let's just be out of sight," she said. *If I looked at my enemy across this grove and thought for a second that it might make sense to simply murder him, I am certain Holler might think the same!*

Echo made no argument, so the three of them slipped back into the tree line, crouching down behind thick bristly thornbushes and peering out to see Starlight and Holler meet in the center of the clearing.

Standing beside the matriarch elephant for the first time ever, Holler looked small to Whisper. But he squared up to her with utter confidence, as if this were his clearing, and she were the interloper.

"Good afternoon, Great Mother," Holler said, dipping his head to her with exaggerated, almost mocking politeness. "And how are you faring today?"

"I am worried, Holler, for the great herd," said Starlight. "Every day more creatures come to me with their concerns about our dwindling food and water. What little we have is not being shared as it should, and the buffalo migration—our only hope that the rains will ever return—has failed to occur. Am I about right, so far?"

"More or less," said Holler.

"The rains must fall. Have you considered that you must lead your herd on migration, whether you have the Way or not."

Holler snorted and pawed the ground with one hoof. "I don't take kindly to being ordered around," he growled, sounding much more like himself.

"I am not ordering you," Starlight said. "Simply stating a fact: if you do not migrate, the rains will not come, the watering hole will dry up, and *all*



of us, including you, will die. You know this, I hope?”

“I do,” sneered Holler. “But I won’t be held responsible for your myths and legends. The rains will come, or they won’t—in the meantime, the strong will survive.”

“All life is connected,” said Starlight, shaking her head sadly. “You cannot live without other species, any more than you can live without air. Your strength will not make the grass grow. And it will not keep the Great Devourer from rising,” Starlight added. “Have you not noticed the cracking ground, the deep chasms below?”

“The earth is dry,” Holler said simply. “Cracks happen.”

“The very fabric of Bravelands is coming undone,” said Starlight. “And if it does, a wave of misery will crash over Bravelands, and you will be swept away with the tide.”

“Don’t try to frighten me with meaningless stories,” sniffed Holler. “I’m not here to be lectured by you, Great Mother. With the greatest respect,” he added.

“If you respected me, you would listen to me,” Starlight said coldly, and a few of the animals around them gave gentle hoots or intakes of breath. “However, since you’re determined not to see reason, please: tell me quickly why you are here and don’t waste any more of my time.”

“Ooooooh,” said Quake. “*Nobody’s* spoken to my father like that since . . . well, I suppose *you* do,” he said to Whisper. “But nobody else speaks to him like that!”

“I know you are harboring Echo, a calf from my herd,” continued Holler. “You say I am not listening—I *am* listening, and I am here to offer you exactly what you want. I will move the herd on, leaving the watering hole—if you hand Echo over to me. He is just a little calf, alone in the world with his sister, barely a year older than he is. He needs to be with his herd. Once we are reunited, if I can find the migration path that will bring the rains, I will.”

“No!” Whisper gasped. “She can’t fall for this! He’s lying!”

Holler’s ears twitched, and he looked over in their direction, making all three young buffalo duck down behind the thornbushes. Whisper’s heart pounded, and she waited for Holler’s shout of recognition—but it didn’t come. She risked another look.

“There have been . . . many misunderstandings,” Holler said. “But I will lead the herd in search of fresh pasture—*when* the herd is complete, and not

before. Echo is nothing to you, and he should be with his own kind. We can protect him.”

“Protect him?” repeated Starlight. “From the reports of others, I was under the impression he was your enemy.”

“Reports differ. It’s true, we’ve had our differences, but that is in the past. Feel free to discuss any *better* options available to you. I will be at the watering hole when you make your decision.”

He turned to go, scattering small creatures who’d crept closer to listen in on the conversation. Before he and his two cronies stepped into the tree tunnel, Starlight raised her trunk and called after them.

“The animals must be allowed to drink from the watering hole!”

Her voice boomed around the clearing, a reminder of just how large and powerful she could be. Quake jumped, and several smaller creatures nearby yelped and dived for cover.

Holler turned around slowly. “All are welcome at my watering hole,” he said. “But someone must ration the water in a time like this. Otherwise, just as you say, everyone will suffer. We keep the place safe for everyone. We keep the crocodiles at bay. They’re getting restless, you know. As the water level drops, their territory is shrinking. Perhaps you should speak to them— isn’t that what the Great Parent is supposed to do?”

He left that suggestion hanging in the air and vanished into the shade of the tree tunnel. Starlight watched him go with an intense glint in her eye. Then she shook her head hard, ears flapping, and let out a long trumpeting sound with her trunk.

“Hear me, all of you. Echo the calf is under my protection. Any creature who thinks of harming him, or delivering him to Holler without my permission, will face my wrath. Is that understood?”

Whisper’s heart warmed to hear Starlight’s firm and uncompromising support, and even more when she saw most of the other animals nodding—they knew Holler wasn’t to be trusted, and they weren’t going to send Echo to his death on the strength of his promises.

But still, Echo trembled beside her, and Whisper turned her nose to nuzzle the top of his head.

“He might be right about the crocodiles, though,” Starlight sighed quietly to Grass, who had climbed up the rock beside her. “They will be feeling aggressive and anxious—and that could be bad for everybody. Though they aren’t always easy to reason with.”

“The same goes for some buffalo I could name,” Grass muttered.



## 10

*Stepping out of the shadow of the dark forest* had been a relief, the relentless sun seeming to burn away some of the horror of that terrible tunnel. Stride wished that the feeling had lasted. It seemed that there was no middle ground anymore—the nights were freezing, the days scorching, and the shadows full of monsters.

And now there was something following them, out here in the dry grass. Stride had noticed them first on their left flank, then soon after on their right—bodies moving, trailing after them, even when he nudged Stonehide into taking a sudden turn around the side of a kopje.

“Yep. I smell them,” Stonehide murmured. “Predators. I think . . .”

“Cheetahs,” said Stride. “It’s cheetahs.”

Stonehide bared his teeth. “Let ’em come,” he snarled. “No skinny cheetah’s going to be a match for old Stonehide.”

“Old Stonehide isn’t the one with a bounty on him,” Stride muttered back. “It’s *me* Jinks wants crippled. He’s promised glory and a place in his coalition to anyone who manages it. . . .”

He shuddered. The horror of that fate—being unable to walk, to hunt, to live any kind of independent life, if you lived at all—was tempered with grief. For poor Fleet, his broken-legged brother, who’d maintained his dignity even after his injury. Jinks had sent One-Eye to kill Fleet, for no reason other than hatred of Stride. But Fleet had been more capable than they’d realized, despite his immobility, and had taken One-Eye down before succumbing to his own injuries.

*So much death, and for what?*

A horrible feeling, laced with guilt, struck Stride all of a sudden.

*And where is Fleet now? Is he in the stars, where he was supposed to go, or is he with Flicker in . . . that place?*

“Well,” said Stonehide, startling Stride out of his reverie, “if you think I’m going to let some mangy social climber kill you, you’ve got another think coming, mate. I reckon you leg it, give them the slip—we know you can outrun them. They’ll probably just leave me, but if they try anything funny, I’ll make them regret it.”

“Thanks, Stonehide,” said Stride with feeling.

His pelt rippled, his steps lengthened, and suddenly he was running, speeding away from Stonehide and their pursuers. He heard a yelp of surprise and thought someone called his name, but he was already gone, the pounding of his heart and his paws and the rushing wind loud in his ears. As he sped up, he listened for pursuit—and sure enough, there was the pounding of paws on the ground, the soft rustle of long bodies bursting through dry vegetation. Stride’s vision, his breathing, everything about himself focused down to the path ahead and the awareness of his pursuers. He just had to run a little faster than them for a little longer, and he knew he could lose them. This wasn’t like catching a prey animal, which always ended in a sudden tumble of teeth and hooves. A chase of cheetah versus cheetah started quick and ended slow—they would all tire soon, even Stride, and the trick was just outlasting them, and not running into a tree or a watering hole, or . . .

*Or cheetahs in my path!*

The speckled fur appeared as if from nowhere, in a burst of dust and flying grass. Stride tried to swerve, but the cheetah slammed into him, bearing him to the ground, and they rolled over and over. Stride got to his paws, letting his momentum draw him back into a run, as the other cheetah stood up—and it was only then that Stride saw the other cheetah's face. He stumbled, coming to a panting stop.

“... Pace?” he gasped.

*Oh, Spirit—it's Pace!*

His cubhood friend, the only member of Jinks's coalition who hadn't turned against him.

*He can't have . . . he can't mean to . . .*

“Stride! It's me!” Pace called. His sides were heaving, and he stumbled toward Stride and then flopped down, tongue lolling with goofy happiness. “Didn't you hear me shouting?”

Stride wanted to sigh with relief, but he was still out of breath. There was no way Pace had come to cripple him. He was the same old Pace, happy-go-lucky even at the end of a hard chase.

“Are you all right?” Pace went on. “I was afraid you might do yourself a mischief, running so fast! Did you think we were going to attack you or something?”

“Haven't you heard?” Stride asked, then shook himself. “No, why would Jinks get word to you? He'd know you'd never go for it.”

“Jinks?” Pace snarled, an uncharacteristic look of disgust coming over his friend's gentle features. “What does that mangy son of a dung beetle want with you now?”

The sound of paws, charging across the plain and slowing as they came closer, interrupted Stride's answer. He turned to see three more cheetahs, ones he didn't know, and he flinched a little in distrust.

“It's all right,” said Pace. “This is Leap, Pounce with the one big spot on his ear there, and Squint—you can see which one is Squint. They're *my* coalition,” he added with an unabashedly proud grin.

“Oh, Pace! Congratulations,” said Stride. “It's, um . . . it's nice to meet you all. Sorry about that—there was a misunderstanding.”

None of the coalition cheetahs seemed to be holding it against him, nodding their greetings to him, friendly enough. They all looked pretty young, younger than Pace and Stride, but they seemed capable nonetheless.

Even so, Stride eyed each one, searching for any sign that they were ready to jump him when his back was turned.

“Oi!” came a shout from behind them. “You get away from him!”

“What does that honey badger *want*?” yelped Leap, jumping half a cheetah’s height off the ground and spinning around with his ears pinned back. “We were just following Pace, and all of a sudden it lunged at me!”

“It tried to claw my ankles!” Squint agreed.

“That’s Stonehide,” said Stride quickly. “It’s all right, he’s a friend of mine—we thought I might be in trouble, and he wanted to slow you down.”

The honey badger came charging across the plain, faster than Stride had ever seen him move. It was clear when he realized that Stride and the other cheetahs were just standing around and not fighting each other, because he slowed right down and approached at a casual saunter, puffing heavily. The other cheetahs backed away and circled nervously as he reached them, but Stride kept his stance casual and greeted Stonehide with a friendly wave of his tail.

“Everything working out all right over here?” Stonehide asked, through panting breaths.

“Sure,” said Squint, “as long as you keep away from my paws, you little maniac.”

“You don’t mess with Stride,” said Stonehide, “and I won’t mess with you.”

“You realize there are four of us?” Pounce said, sniffing at Stonehide—without getting too close.

“I realize,” Stonehide said with a slight sneer. “You can get some more buddies if you think it’s still an unfair fight.”

“All right,” said Stride, keen to move on before good-natured posturing turned into actual aggression. “I’m so glad it’s you, Pace. I haven’t seen a friendly cheetah face in a while!”

“I heard about Flicker,” said Pace solemnly. “I’m so sorry, Stride.”

Stride nodded. “It was the shadow,” he said, and he saw all four other cheetahs shudder. They knew exactly what that meant, had probably seen the shadow themselves, when they pushed a chase too far and their vision pulsed with oily blue-black spots. . . .

“And I heard you were living with the Great Mother now?” Pace prompted.

"I needed some advice, after Flicker," said Stride. "Great Mother Starlight has been . . ."

He stopped. Looking into the open, friendly face of Pace, he couldn't quite bring himself to explain it all—his visions of Flicker's spirit, the rise of the Great Devourer, Starlight's mission to follow the hyena, and now the awful black tunnel in the dark forest . . . it was all too much. Suddenly he felt very, very tired.

"She's helped," he finished simply.

"I'm . . . glad," said Pace, though his tone suggested he was holding something back.

"I know it's not exactly *normal* cheetah behavior," Stride began.

Pace chuckled. "No, it's just . . . well, are you . . . do you want to stay there? Are you happy with the elephants?"

"I wouldn't say *happy*," Stride admitted.

Pace cast a glance to the others. "Only, we could use you. You were always one of the fastest hunters. I've missed having you around. It'd be like the old times—except without Jinks bossing us about! Imagine living in a coalition with a leader who's not maddeningly insecure," he added with a grin. "We'd love to have you. You lot, you don't know Stride," he said to the others, "But you'll like him when you do."

Despite himself, Stride felt his heart lighten. The idea of going back to coalition life—having others by his side, having *friends*, not worrying about anything other than where the next prey would be found . . . it sounded wonderful.

*But I have to save Flicker. I have to stop the Great Devourer. I can't just give up on them.*

But . . . was he doing that? Had he done anything of use, other than run errands for Starlight? Couldn't someone else do it just as well, or better?

He glanced at Stonehide, feeling torn, and saw the honey badger looking back at him with claw-sharp eyes, as if he understood exactly the thoughts running through Stride's head.

"What do you think?" he asked. "We still need to report back to the Great Mother. . . ."

"I can do that," said Stonehide firmly.

"But . . ."

"Listen to me," said Stonehide. "C'mere."



He jerked his head, leading Stride a few paces away from the others, and lowered his voice.

“This is a rare thing,” Stonehide told him. “The opportunity for a new life being dropped right at your paws. When my Silverpelt died, it almost ruined me. Maybe it did. My grief ate me up. It doesn’t have to be the same for you. The Great Mother can find you—I can find you, if I need you.”

“But can I really just . . . go?” Stride asked.

“I don’t know,” said Stonehide. “Can you?”

He stared at Stride for a moment longer, and then Stride looked up at Pace and smiled.

“I’d love to join you,” he said. Pace grinned and turned in a happy circle.

“Good lad,” said Stonehide under his breath. “Goodbye, then, and good luck. See you again one day—I hope not too soon.”

And with that, the old honey badger walked away, toward the Great Mother’s forest, leaving Stride with Pace’s—with *his* coalition.

Stride let himself feel the loss, let himself miss Stonehide and miss the purpose of trying to solve Bravelands’ problems all on his own. Then he shook himself, as if they were droplets of water or loose blades of grass that could be scattered away.

“All right,” he said to Pace. “Where next?”



## 11

*The bones of the zebra lay beneath the fallen tree. One of the other hyenas had covered up Hidetearer's body, and Breathstealer was glad her former foe was no longer watching with those dead, blank eyes.*

Breathstealer had pulled a great chunk of meat from the zebra's flank and dragged it over to Nosebiter, and they ate, watching the vultures perching, waiting for their moment. Vultures weren't picky. They'd go straight for Hidetearer as soon as they saw a chance.

*Will they return to the Great Mother afterward? Breathstealer wondered. Will they tell her this was a good death or a bad one?*

Not that it mattered. What could the Great Parent do to her? Breathstealer had the blessing of the Devourer. Hyenas didn't need to answer to the so-called Great Spirit—it could take its moralizing elsewhere. Death was simply death. Neither good nor bad, but simply inevitable, whether quick or slow.

She took another delicious bite of fresh zebra and glanced at Nosebiter, hoping she was as pleased with their spoils. But her sister was looking back at her through sidelong, narrowed eyes and looked away again as she saw Breathstealer looking.

“What?” Breathstealer asked. “Something wrong?”

“What do you mean?” Nosebiter said.

Breathstealer huffed with annoyance. Her sister always did this. Flatly refusing to engage with the issue wasn't going to solve it. “You're staring at me like you're sharing your prey with a crocodile, Nosey.”

“I am the leader of this clan,” Nosebiter sniffed, “I may look at my own sister however I like.”

“So you *were* looking.” Breathstealer let her tongue loll from her jaws, childishly pleased with herself. Nosebiter didn't look amused.

“You did this,” she said. “You killed Hidetearer.”

The solemnity in Nosebiter's voice surprised Breathstealer.

*Do you care? Really?*

“The tree killed her,” Breathstealer said. “The termites killed the tree. The Great Devourer works in strange ways to protect its own.”

Nosebiter didn't respond, simply stared at Breathstealer as if she was saying something deeply suspicious. Breathstealer shook her head.

“She was our enemy, Nosebiter,” she said. “I told her what would happen if she stole this prey from us, but she was trying to take over the clan—to steal it from you!—and she wouldn't listen. It's not my fault she was such a dung-eater. Order has been restored to the clan. I'm surprised you're not grateful!” she snapped, losing her temper a little.

Nosebiter regarded her carefully and then looked around at the other hyenas, lying in the dry grass and eating their share of the zebra, and then back at Breathstealer.

“They're afraid of you,” she said.

“So they should be!” Breathstealer said.

Her own words startled her a little, but then she thought, *Yes. They should. They've ignored me and mocked me, and when I was bringing good*

*news and fresh prey to them they still showed no respect, to me or the Great Devourer. If they can't do anything else, then let them be afraid! Let them call me "Tailgrabber" now. . . .*

"Are you planning to take my place?" Nosebiter said. "If you are, will you challenge me for the leadership, or will you just have the ground beneath me dug out by beetles one day?"

Breathstealer stared at her sister. "No!" she gasped. "I can't believe you'd think—no! I did this for you! So you could stay leader and have your cub without Hidetearer breathing down your neck the whole time. And yes, obviously, I'm glad if I get a little more respect around here," she added. "It wouldn't hurt if you said something to them. About the Great Devourer. Everything good that's happened to this clan in the last few days has been because of the Devourer's blessing. We are *its* creatures, or we were. I'm just saying, the Great Spirit hasn't done much for Bravelands recently, has it?"

Nosebiter rolled her eyes. "I prefer not to get too involved in *any* spirit business," she said. "But I will listen when you tell me what you hear from the insects. Good enough?"

"Good enough," said Breathstealer with a solemn nod.

It was early the next day, after full stomachs and a night's restful sleep had calmed the clan and returned things almost to normal, when Breathstealer scented lions. Several lions.

A few of the others seemed to have smelled them at the very same time. Ears pricked up and hackles raised, a couple of hyenas leaped to their paws. In a small cloud of dust, a single male hyena came charging over the hill and down toward the baobab, and prostrated himself at Nosebiter's paws.

"Lions!" he gasped. "Three of them, coming this way. They have a cub with them."

"A *lion* cub?" Breathstealer frowned. Why would any lion risk bringing one of their own cubs to a hyena den?

"They're walking to their deaths," spat Spinesnapper. "Three lions against a hyena clan? On our territory?"

"Maybe they plan to distract us while the rest of their pride attacks from behind us," Nosebiter said darkly. She addressed the males. "Cub, put scouts all around the baobab. And put an extra guard on the den," she added. Breathstealer looked away, not wanting to meet her sister's eyes. Her

first cub had been killed in a surprise raid by lions—one that Breathstealer herself had been partially responsible for.

The hyenas fell into a panicky kind of readiness, waiting for the lions, and at last four tawny bodies arrived. Sure enough, it was three adults and one cub so small it was barely a smudge of pelt against the dry grass. They approached slowly. By the time they were within shouting distance, Breathstealer could clearly see that they looked skinny, and none of them could be more than a few years old—the male who walked in the middle would have been too young to be a pride leader in any other year. When Breathstealer joined Nosebiter to face them, he dipped his head cautiously to them and said, “Greetings. My name is Sly, of Slypride.”

Nosebiter tilted her head to one side and said nothing.

“This is Superb,” Sly went on, nodding to the female on his right and then to the male on his left. “And this is Daring. We have come to offer a truce with your clan.”

For a moment, Breathstealer couldn’t understand what he meant. A *truce*? Between lions and hyenas?

*Is he that young, he thinks we’ll agree to a truce?*

But then she looked into Sly’s earnest face, and then over at Nosebiter, and an inner voice that she hadn’t heard in a while suddenly started clamoring to be heard. The same one that had questioned her mother’s decisions when they’d been warring with the lions. She’d even set out to seek the Great Parent’s guidance to try to end the constant killing. It seemed like a long time ago now.

*He is not Noble, and she is not Gutripper. Could this be genuinely a chance for a kind of peace between us?*

“The path to creating Slypride was a hard one,” Sly said. He took a deep breath, steadying himself, suddenly showing his nerves at being so wildly outnumbered. “We don’t want your territory—there aren’t enough of us, we couldn’t hunt on it anyway. And we don’t want you trying to come and take ours, either. We consulted the Great Mother, and she suggested we come to you and *talk* instead.”

Nosebiter let his words hang in the air for a moment, considering, sniffing the air as if taking the measure of his scent. Breathstealer watched them both carefully. This could still end in bloodshed.

“And why would we trust you?” Nosebiter said at last. “Even if we wanted a truce, instead of pushing onto your territory? Noblepride was full

of liars and thieves. Why would we think you were different?”

“Because of this,” said Sly, and he turned to look behind him and ushered a tiny, trembling cub out in front of him. “This is Cub,” he said. “One of my own, just weaned, not even named yet. The Great Mother suggested that we leave him here with you, as a show of good faith. While we have peace between us, Cub gets to live, here among the hyenas. If we make any kind of move against you . . . well, we won’t, as long as no harm comes to him, and if we do, you’ll have leverage against us.”

Breathstealer stared at the cub. He was a scrawny thing, as thin as his father, with the huge, liquid eyes of a cub who knew exactly what his fate might turn out to be. He looked up at her and beheld his potential death. But he didn’t look away.

“Such a thing is unheard of,” said Nosebiter cautiously. “You speak of *leverage* and *harm*—let me be completely clear, if you break this truce, we will kill your cub, and then we will come for you. Our vengeance will know no bounds.”

Sly bowed slightly, not enough to be deferential, but just enough to indicate agreement—and respect. After another long pause, Nosebiter matched him.

“A truce, then,” she said. “And if you betray us, let the Great Devourer drag your spirit to the underworld and your body become food for worms.”

“Understood,” said Sly. He leaned down and gave the cub a last nuzzle. “Be brave, Cub. Do as you’re told.”

“I—I will,” squeaked the cub. His gaze swapped from Breathstealer to his father, and he turned with tiny, padding steps to watch as the three adult lions turned their backs on him and walked away, not looking back.

When they had gone, he turned back, saw the gaggle of hyenas looming over him with curious stares and predatory grins, and curled up into an even tinier ball of brown fluff.

“What do we do with it?” Spinesnapper asked, sniffing at him with a combination of fascination and disdain.

“We hold on to it, for now,” said Nosebiter. “And we don’t harm it. New pride or not, I don’t trust them. They could be waiting for us to hurt him so they can blame us for breaking the truce and have an excuse to attack.”

“Sly’s own cub, though?” Breathstealer interceded. “Why would he do that?”

“That’s a good question. Have they sunk so low? A hyena would never surrender one of our cubs to our enemies,” Nosebiter said thoughtfully.

There was a pause, a short silence into which the sound of pitiful meowing dropped, like a stone into a still pond.

“I’m hungry,” the cub said in a tiny voice.

“So are we,” said Spinesnapper, lowering her voice and lunging at the cub. It shrieked and fell sideways, rolling over on its back, little legs kicking in terror.

“Stand up, Cub. Nobody will be eating you,” Breathstealer said, rolling her eyes.

To her surprise, the cub scampered behind her legs and crouched there, looking up at Spinesnapper with fear.

*You should be more afraid of me than the others*, she thought. But she didn’t say that. Instead, she found herself saying, “We have leftover zebra. Come with me, Cub,” and setting off toward the food store in the roots of the tree. The cub scrambled after her, his little yellow tail bouncing and twitching along behind him.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“I am Breathstealer,” she replied. “Nosebiter is our leader. She’s my sister.”

“I’m Cub,” said the tiny lion. “I don’t have my name yet. My—my father was going to choose one for me soon, but . . .” He fell silent.

“That’s how we do it too,” said Breathstealer, feeling a strange urge to comfort. “Sort of. We earn our names through our deeds—the clan chooses a name, based on the method of our first kill. Of course, we still call the males Cub,” she added, “Because who has time to learn males’ names—but they have names they call themselves, I think.”

She sighed, thinking of her own first name, the mocking name Hidetearer and Skullcracker and her mother, Gutripper, had bestowed upon her: Tailgrabber, after an undignified half-kill.

But she had renamed herself. Breathstealer, after her first true kill: the lion who had led the raid that killed Nosebiter’s firstborn. And now she had outlived her tormentors, and there were few left who would ever use the name Tailgrabber again.

“If you make it through this,” she told Cub, “and get safely back to your pride, they should call you Resilient, or Courage—or maybe Lucky.”

She was hoping that this would cheer the cub up a little—she wasn't sure why, the thing would only grow up into a lion and become her enemy, but for now it was just a little scrap of fur, not so different from the cub Nosebiter had lost, and if he was going to live the rest of his short life here with them, there was no sense in making it miserable.

However, it seemed something about this talk of names had upset him, because he crouched down into a little hunched ball, his paws tucked in tight.

"I don't think they'll call me anything," he said. "I don't think I'm going to make it back. . . ."

"Well, it won't be because we hurt you first," Breathstealer said firmly. "We're a proud clan, and we'll keep our word. I'll make sure of it."

The lion cub looked up at her with a deep sadness still shining in his eyes. "You don't seem like the others," he said.

"I'm not," said Breathstealer.

"My mother was killed by hyenas," said Cub.

Breathstealer nodded. "My nephew was killed by lions. And many others, too. It is . . . it has always been that way."

Again, a tiny voice, a little spark in Breathstealer's mind, suddenly flared in the dark: *What if it didn't have to be? What if there could be peace?*

"Her name was Bold," the cub said. "She was very brave, but one day she went out scouting and she didn't come back."

A shiver ran down Breathstealer's spine.

*Bold. I know that name.*

In a flash, Breathstealer remembered the taunting lion, crowing about how she'd tricked Breathstealer into leading her to the baobab tree, where she had killed Nosebiter's cub. She remembered the furious anger, the fight, pressing down on Bold's throat until her breath stopped coming. The nameless cub's mother had been the kill that had given Breathstealer her new name.

*Bold killed Cub. I killed Bold. Now Bold's cub is here with me, under my power—and I have promised to keep him alive. Do we end the cycle here, or will this end in blood too?*

*Does it even matter?*

What would the Great Devourer say? It would probably chide her for being sentimental. Lions and hyenas killed each other all the time. Death



was everywhere, death was just death.

But she decided not to tell Cub what she'd remembered.

"Eat up," she said, nudging the strip of meat toward the little creature.  
"You're going to need your strength."



## 12

*It was the end of yet another a long, hot day. Only the hardest creatures, basking lizards and a pack of incredibly stubborn and sun-bleached wild dogs, remained in the Great Mother's clearing, but the shade under the branches and the elephants' tree tunnel was thronged with frazzled, anxious creatures. Whisper, Quake, and Echo had stayed close to Starlight as she had retreated back into the trees, taking up a position between two dry and cracking trunks where she just barely fit, in order to make more space for her petitioners to stand in the shade. Grass was doing his best to maintain order, but there had been fights breaking out over what little food could be scavenged in the scorched forest.*

Several animals who had come today hadn't even asked Starlight for help—they'd been warned there was none coming. But they had still decided to make the trek, to simply sit down in front of her and tell her their stories. Tales of frustration and woe, of dying cubs and dangerous journeys. The mood was sometimes solemn and hopeless, other times fractious and angry, and it would flip very suddenly.

Whisper was sitting with Echo and Quake and dozing, feeling slightly weak, when a screeching voice broke the sullen quiet.

"The Great Spirit has abandoned us!" someone was shrieking. Whisper startled and clattered up to standing, squinting over at Starlight. There was a monkey standing in front of her, pointing wildly with one finger, shaking with fury.

"That is not true," Starlight said in a deep, resonant, and incredibly tired voice.

"No?" the monkey cried. "Then where is it? Why does it permit these buffalo to hold us all to ransom? What use is a Great Mother who just watches us all perish slowly? What use are *you*, Starlight?"

"That's right," muttered voices all around them. "Why are we even here?"

But it seemed nobody had the energy to truly riot. Grass visibly steeled himself and moved to try to usher the monkey away, but Starlight put out her trunk and stopped him.

"Let him speak," she whispered. "Let him get it out. It is a fair criticism. Let everyone hear it."

Grass gave her a horrified look.

Over the monkey's shoulder, something in the clearing caught Whisper's eye. She startled, catching her breath.

When had all these vultures arrived?

They perched on the branches, on the rocks, on the fallen trees that had been toppled to make this space once, long ago. White-backed vultures, hooded vultures, and griffon vultures had all gathered, and for a moment Whisper checked the ground in confusion—had some creature actually died in the clearing, bringing them flocking to feast on the remains? But no—as Whisper understood it, each of the birds represented a death in Bravelands, one that had been tasted by the vultures and would be reported to the Great Mother.

The monkey went on ranting, though he was obviously growing tired. Over his head, Whisper saw Starlight's gaze flicker to the vultures and then back to her furious petitioner.

"We can't carry on like this," muttered Quake. "There must be *something* we can do to get rid of Holler. . . ."

"There is," said Echo.

Whisper glared at him. "I hope you didn't mean . . ."

"I turn myself in," said Echo. "What use is a true leader if they don't have a herd to lead?"

"That's absurd," said Whisper quickly. "You know we can't trust a word Holler says; he won't just kill you, he'll kill you and then stay exactly where he is, and we'll be no better off, and I'll have lost you. In our mother's name, I won't let that happen." She lowered her head and pressed it to her little brother's.

He took a shaky breath. "But what if . . . what if I let him kill me? There would have to be a new leader. The oxpeckers would choose another buffalo, maybe one the herd will follow. Maybe one that has a chance of beating Holler in a real challenge."

"It wouldn't work," said Quake sadly. "It's not just that you're still a calf, Echo. If you had the Way, I'm sure they'd follow you. Even if we had to prove it by going on a three-buffalo migration all by ourselves. But if you died, the Way wouldn't just come back, would it?"

"I . . . no," said Echo. "No, it wouldn't."

Whisper frowned. A thought was tickling at the edge of her mind, but she couldn't seem to capture it. Everything around her kept stealing her focus from it—the monkey's ranting puttering to a sudden, awkward end, a vulture swooping down to speak to the Great Mother. The look on the elephant's face as the incomprehensible croaking caw emerged from the bird.

Starlight let out a sigh and sagged even farther, her trunk dragging on the ground. She nodded along, closing her eyes, as the vulture creaked the last of its message and then took off again, spiraling away into the sky.

"Great Mother?" Grass asked. "Are you all right?"

Starlight took a moment to answer him.

"It is not good news," she said at last. "Breathstealer . . . the Great Devourer grows in influence, its hoard of stolen spirits swells, and his chosen hyenas are caught in its web. . . ."

And that's when the thought clarified in Whisper's mind, like an image suddenly seen in whirling clouds. "The Devourer," she said. "The spirits!" She looked at Echo with a slightly wild expression. "Echo, the spirits of the dead . . . Great Mother!" she called, leaving Echo and Quake and the shade of the trees, and running out in front of the elephant. She heard mutters of discontent and disappointment, as creatures who'd been waiting for hours or days complained about her jumping ahead—but they could wait a few moments longer, and if she was right about this . . .

"Great Mother," she gasped. "When did the Devourer start capturing spirits?"

"I . . . don't know exactly," Starlight said. "What's the matter, Whisper?"

"Can you make a guess?" Whisper said. "Do you think it was before or after Bellow died?"

"Oh. *Oh*," Starlight said, and her eyes widened. "Oh, curse me for a silly old fool, that didn't once occur to me . . . though, I'm sorry to say I don't know how it could be done."

"How *what* could be done?" asked Quake, looking disturbed. "I don't like the sound of this, Whisper!"

"If Bellow's spirit is with the Great Devourer, captive somewhere . . . maybe it's still carrying the wisdom of the Way. Maybe we could convene with him, or *free* him, or . . . or something. But that's why we're stuck, because we need Bellow. And Bellow still exists. We think," she added, glancing again at Starlight, who nodded slowly.

"But he's *dead* . . .," Quake muttered.

"But not gone," Starlight said. "Or not gone to the stars, where the Great Spirit would usually keep good spirits, beyond the troubles of our world. Perhaps there is some way to get from this world to the Devourer's—but I will tell you again, Whisper, I do not know how it can be done. No spirit has ever escaped the Devourer's captivity that I've heard of. And even if they could be reached, I am sure the Great Devourer would never give up a spirit as great as Bellow."

"Well, this is quite a conversation to walk into," said a gruff voice. A small creature was approaching, and after a moment Whisper remembered he was the honey badger who'd been traveling with the cheetah. But he was alone now.

“Stonehide, where is Stride?” Starlight asked, echoing Whisper’s own thoughts. “I’m afraid news of Breathstealer’s actions has reached me already. The vultures have told me about her slide toward darkness.”

The honey badger gave Starlight a sort of nonplussed sneer. “So we went into the Black Branches and followed her into that swamp for nothing, did we? Course we did. Lucky we tripped over an entrance to the underworld on the way out, eh?”

Whisper’s stomach turned over yet again, and her heart began to pound. Starlight’s ears twitched and flapped in surprise.

“I’m sorry . . . what did you say?” asked the Great Mother.

“I heard you lot, talking about getting some spirit or other out of the dark place,” Stonehide said. “Well, I don’t know how easy it’ll be to find your particular spirit or get him out, but Stride and I reckon we found an entrance.”

He described his find, and as he did, Whisper’s hair rippled with shivers. The Black Branches swamp, the too-dark hole, the sensation of being swallowed, the lightless light, and the swarms of mocking insects—it all sounded too horrible to be real, but despite his smug posturing to begin with, the honey badger looked completely sincere.

When he finished his description, silence fell over the clearing. Every creature seemed to hold its breath. Even the monkeys, who’d been busy somewhere on the edge of hearing rehashing and recriminating among themselves, had gone quiet.

The sun was sinking below the trees, casting long, cold shadows over half the space, leaving the other side still giving off heat haze. Whisper’s shivers intensified as the darkness washed over her.

“I will go,” said Echo in a small, clear voice.

“And I’ll go with you,” said Whisper quickly.

Echo turned to look at her, and his eyes shone with a sadness that was far too adult for his small form.

“I don’t think you can,” he said. “I *have* to go—if I can find Bellow and he can tell me the Way, this could all end! But I don’t want to drag you along with me. It doesn’t sound like being small will be much of a hinderance. If you’ll show me the way,” he added, looking to Stonehide, “I’ll follow you.”

Stonehide nodded solemnly.

“Come on, Echo,” Whisper said desperately. “You can’t stop me coming with you! You’re my little brother, I need to be with you if you’re going to do this!”

“You’ve done so much for me,” said Echo. “And no, I can’t stop you following. But I don’t want you to. I want you to stay here and be safe so that someone can handle things, if . . . if it doesn’t go well.”

Whisper was about to protest. The thought of her little brother venturing alone was ridiculous. But before she could voice her objections, Starlight interrupted.

“Echo’s right,” she said. “There may come a time when I need a buffalo ally at my side.”

“And not to be rude, but you wouldn’t fit anyway,” added Stonehide.

“He’ll need a guide, though,” said Starlight, flapping her ears at the honey badger.

“No rest for the wicked,” muttered Stonehide, then shook his tail. “It would be my pleasure.”

“This is a very, very brave thing to do, Echo,” said Starlight. “Are you sure?”

Echo smiled grimly and headbutted Whisper gently again with a clatter of horns.

“It’s our only hope.”

Starlight sighed. “You must leave at dusk, to have the best chance of not being seen.

The buffalo will be resting, but you will still have to be very careful. Go as far around as you need to, to be safe. This must remain a secret from Holler, or he will do his worst to stop you.”

“Maybe we can distract him somehow,” Quake said. “Make him think we’ve got some other plan.”

“Hmm.” Starlight glanced up, looking at the fading blue of the sky as if searching for something. “Maybe.”

“This is insane!” came a hysterical cry from the branches over their heads. The monkey, the same one who’d confronted Starlight before, was gesticulating wildly. “Doesn’t anyone see this? This is never going to work! They’re going to go into a hole, and we’re all going to die! The Great Spirit has abandoned us, and we’re all going to die!”

Some more monkeys—relatives, perhaps—grabbed onto his arms and gently but firmly pulled him away, with apologetic looks back at Starlight.

But even when his panicky raving had faded, the swell of conversation came back to the creatures who stood around the clearing, and Whisper could feel the piercing gaze of dozens of eyes on her. The looks were distrustful and scared. A horrible thought occurred to her as she watched Starlight placing her trunk gently on Echo's horn again and ignoring the intense looks of the others.

*Even if we succeed, she thought. Even if the rains do come at last . . . we might be too late to restore faith in the Great Mother. . . .*





## 13

*Stride let out a howling laugh, rolling over on his back in the grass.*

“They didn’t!” he said.

“Would I lie to you?” Pace chuckled. “I saw it with my own eyes. A whole lion pride, fooled by a mirage! They jumped off the rock in a great wave of fur—and crashed down into nothing but hard mud. It was beautiful. Almost worth the watering hole drying up, just to see it. And watching them try to walk it off like they’d done it on purpose was even better.”

Stride shook his head in wonder, still laughing. “I wish I’d been there.”

His stomach rumbled, and the mood soured a little. The fact was, as much fun as it was to be back with Pace, trying to worry about nothing but

hunting and protecting his coalition, they couldn't pretend things were the way they used to be. The herds that usually lived in this part of the plains had moved on in search of fresh grasses elsewhere. If the number of scattered, bleached skeletons they found already picked clean was anything to go by, they hadn't found it yet.

"Leap and Squint will be back from their scouting before dusk," said Pace. "I'm sure they'll find something."

"Maybe a watering hole," Stride said, grinning a rueful grin, shutting his eyes to imagine the scene. "Peaceful and cool, fresh water and green grass, surrounded by lazy gazelles . . ."

"If they come back saying that," Pace said, "I think we can safely assume they found a mirage too."

Stride sighed. "I believe in the Great Mother," he said. "I think she *will* find a way to sort this out, but . . ."

"But when?" Pace said. "We can't go on waiting for her to fix everything, Stride. We have to move on, find new territory."

Stride didn't answer for a moment.

He knew it was a good idea. He knew that if they were going to starve, they might as well do it on the move, keeping hope alive as long as possible.

And yet, he found himself searching for a good reason to stay.

Flicker wasn't here, and his memories of life on the plains of Bravelands were mixed, at best. There was nothing left for him to do, if he wasn't going to return to the Great Mother. There was really nothing tying him to this place. It didn't make sense, but he still had this itching, uncomfortable feeling that he couldn't leave.

*Can't? Don't want to? Perhaps I'm just afraid of change, but I don't understand why. . . .*

He wondered what Stonehide was up to and regretted their parting had been so perfunctory.

"Anyway," said Pace, getting up and stretching out his spine. "It's nearly noon, and I know somewhere it'll be much less hot. Might be a bit crowded, but we'll cope."

"Sounds good to me," said Stride. As they stood, shook themselves off, and started to pad across the hot plain, Stride gave his friend a sidelong look. "And—not that I'm questioning your coalition authority," he said with

a cheeky eye roll, “but why have we been lying out in the hot sun and not in this shady spot all day?”

“You’ll know when we get there,” said Pace.

He was right, too. Pace led Stride along a rocky ridge that suddenly dropped away on one side, leading down into a deep and sheltered ravine. It was a cramped space, barely a few cheetah-lengths wide at the bottom. The rock of the cliff side was fractured, jutting out unevenly and forming steps and shelves all the way down, and as Pace had warned, it was crowded with creatures taking advantage of the shade. Stride’s mouth began to water as he saw a small herd of dik-diks crowded onto one rock outcrop—but he immediately saw the problem. There was no way to stalk them here; they would see a predator coming long before they could be reached, and there was no chance of a decent chase either. Most prey who could get down there in the first place would be at least as good at leaping from rock to rock as the cheetahs were, or better.

Though as they descended into the shadows, Stride caught a glimpse of other cheetah pelts, and he immediately stiffened. “Pace. There are cheetahs down there.”

“Oh! *Really?*” said Pace, with such exaggerated surprise that Stride became immediately suspicious. He peered over and then said, “That’s Dash! She’s a female who lives near here, and that’s her friend Slink. Let’s go down and say hello!”

*A female who lives near here . . . sure, thought Stride, rolling his eyes. And I’m sure the fact that they’re here at the same time we’re here is a complete coincidence!*

He kept his thoughts to himself for now, but he wasn’t remotely surprised when Pace jumped down to the ledge where the two female cheetahs were sitting and tossed his head back, posing in an attitude of graceful confidence, and Dash looked up and slow-blinked at him.

“Pace,” she said. “Nice to see you again.”

“*Ladies,*” Pace said, and Stride muffled a guffaw. Pace was not a naturally *smooth* cheetah, and watching him try to be was entertaining and painful all at once.

Luckily, it was immediately obvious that Dash found it endearing. She kept on slow-blinking at him, an ostentatious show of trust and fondness, and she even rolled a little onto her back to wash her front paws.

"I'm glad you're still here," she said. "I thought you might have left without saying goodbye."

"I would never," said Pace. "I would come to find you, if I could."

"We have been talking of moving on, too," Dash said with a sigh. "We can't keep hiding in this ravine when the sun gets too hot—and I want my future cubs to have the best possible chance."

"Of course," said Pace. "We have to protect the future of our kind, as well as ourselves."

For a moment, Stride was surprised. She was already having cubs? But no, she meant imaginary, theoretical future cubs—and the way she and Pace sighed dreamily at each other made it abundantly clear who she was hoping their father would be.

"Are you going to introduce me to your friend, Pace?" Dash's friend spoke up.

"This is Stride," said Pace, coming out of his reverie a little. "We've been friends since we were cubs. He's incredibly brave and devoted, he cared for his crippled brother for years, and then he stood up to Jinks when he tried to have him killed. And since then he's been working for the Great Mother," he added, visibly swelling with pride.

Stride cringed a little to hear himself talked up like this—especially when she saw the look on Slink's face. He could almost see the fluttering of her heart behind her eyes.

"Nice to meet you both," he said politely.

"It sounds like you've had quite a time," said Slink. "I've never seen the Great Mother in person—is she as wise as they say?"

*Wise, yes. Helpful . . .*

But Stride didn't really want to get into it right now with this cheetah he didn't know.

What was Pace thinking? Introducing him to a new female right now, when he had *just* decided that perhaps, one day, he *might* get over Flicker? Didn't Pace realize that all Stride's stories, all his supposedly heroic deeds, had been with or for Flicker? He was certain Slink didn't want to know about that. . . .

His pelt prickled and heated with embarrassment. Slink was saying something else, picking up on his hesitation and covering it with some kind of comment about the weather. It was kind of her, and he didn't feel worthy of it.

He shook himself and said, "Yes, it's awful isn't it? Do you two have a good source of water? You don't need to tell me where," he added quickly.

"Not really," said Dash. "We've been searching for tiny puddles and licking up the dew in the morning, like everyone else. We tried to sneak up to the big watering hole a couple of times, where that buffalo tyrant is keeping it all for himself."

"How did *that* go?" Pace asked, awed.

"We managed to get down to the water, and even had a sip," said Slink. "Then we were mobbed by crocodiles, and *they* woke the buffalo, and we had to run for our lives. I'd do it again—but only if we were actually dying."

"Like I said . . ." Pace sighed. "There's *got* to be water somewhere that's not guarded by giant, malignant cows."

"Do have any ideas, Stride?" asked Slink a little shyly. "Do you have any family? Or . . . cubs of your own?"

Stride winced. "No. Not yet," he mumbled. "Pace, can I have a word?" He looked up the shadowy ravine and spotted another ledge, far enough from the female cheetahs that their word wouldn't carry immediately back to them.

Pace looked nonplussed. "All right," he said with a twitch of his tail. "Excuse us, we'll be back in a minute."

Stride led the way, scrambling along ledges and leaping up the cliffside until they reached the spot he'd seen. A couple of nesting birds and small sheltering animals startled and scattered—Stride wished he'd been paying enough attention to catch them, but he was distracted. He could almost feel Pace's hackles prickling even when he wasn't looking at him.

"What was that?" Pace hissed, sure enough, as soon as they were up on the ledge.

"I see what you're doing!" Stride hissed right back. "It's not subtle!"

"Well, we don't really have time for subtle," Pace said. "If we're going to move on, we either invite them with us or we don't. I'm going to ask Dash to come, and I thought . . . I know it's a *bit* quick, but you have to move on from Flicker sometime, right?"

"I . . . I just . . ."

"Slink's a fine hunter," Pace went on. "She'd make a good mate, a good mother for your cubs. . . ."

"It's not that," Stride said. "It isn't about Slink. I can't just move on, not while—"

He broke off, feeling his stomach drop, as if he'd run off a sudden cliff edge at top speed.

*What am I doing here? Flicker needs me, and I'm standing around flirting—badly—with my friend's mate's friend. . . .*

"What?" Pace said. "Listen, if there's something . . . you can tell me, you know. Whatever it is that keeps you awake at night, staring at the stars and pretending to be asleep . . . Yes, nothing gets past me," he added with a cheeky roll of his eyes. "Come on, something's clearly biting you. Out with it."

"It's . . . you might not believe me," Stride said. "That's why I didn't tell you about it in the first place. Flicker . . . she's not . . . really *gone*."

"What?" Pace's jaw dropped. "She's not dead?"

"No, she . . . she is dead. It's her spirit. I've seen it."

Pace gave him a look of slowly gathering confusion, his brows drawing down and jaw hanging open in. But before he could say anything, someone called his name—and it wasn't Dash or Slink.

"Pace! There you are! Pace!" They both looked up, squinting against the bright sky, seeing another cheetah leaning over, silhouetted against the sun.

"Pounce?" Pace called up. "That you?"

"You've got to come," Pounce gasped. "It's Leap. We were attacked."

Stride shuddered.

"We're on our way!" Pace cried. He led the way, leaping and clambering up the side of the ravine until they scrambled out at the top. Pounce didn't wait to explain, but streaked away across the plain, leaving Pace and Stride to stumble after him, trying to catch their breath.

They ran back toward the spot where they had been and past it, over some gently rolling, dusty hills. They passed a pack of giraffes at speed, ignoring their startled cries.

They saw the two yellow-and-black smudges on the ground as they crested another small hill and skidded down toward them. Squint looked up, and his ears twitched as he saw his coalition coming. Leap didn't move. For a moment, Stride thought the worst had happened, but then he came close enough to see Leap's chest rising and falling quickly—and the wound in his flank, jagged and horrible.

Pace started asking what had happened, and Squint started to tell him, but Stride knew. As soon as he saw the wounds on Leap, and the look of fury and shock on Pounce's face.

The attacker hadn't gone for the throat or the belly. They hadn't been attacking to feed, or even to kill—they had been trying to cripple Leap.

He simply nodded along, his heart pounding in his ears, as Squint said, "He came out of nowhere—he was sort of mangy-looking, but he was strong and came at us as if we had done him some kind of terrible injury, but I've never seen him before in my life—and he just kept saying he could smell Stride, where was Stride? He had Leap on the ground, and he was going to kill him. . . ."

"But I didn't tell him," Leap gasped through gritted teeth. "I refuse to betray . . . my coalition. . . ." He winced, and Pace put a gentle paw near him—not quite on him, probably not wanting to risk hurting him more.

"You did well," he said. "Rest now. We'll get you up and moving, get somewhere safe."

"It was Jinks," said Stride hollowly.

"Yep," said Pace. "Don't worry—either of you, any of you. We stick together from now on. We're more than a match for Jinks if he can't sneak up on us. Let him come find Stride—we'll be ready for him."

"Fine by me," sniffed Squint. "And Pounce, too."

Pounce hesitated for a second, then nodded quiet agreement.

"If I can stand," snarled Leap faintly, "count me in. . . ."

Pace turned to Stride. "That's what a coalition is for. We'll find somewhere defensible, and then we'll . . ."

"No," said Stride in a small voice. He cleared his throat. "No, that's no good."

"Stride—" Pace said in a warning tone, but Stride cut him off.

"I have to go. I wish—I *dearly* wish that coalition life was right for me, right now, but it isn't. It's not just Leap. It's Slink. It's moving out of this place. I can't do any of it, not right now."

"Because of . . . Flicker?" Pace said. He met Stride's eyes, and then his gaze passed to the others, and Stride could see him trying to decide whether to ask about what he'd said back at the ravine in front of the rest of the coalition.

Stride gave a rueful half smile. "It's one thing Jinks and I have in common," he said. "Neither of us can let go."

Pace gave him a wide-eyed, *I have further questions* kind of look, but Stride pushed on, eager to have it done now that he'd made his decision.

"I am sorry to leave you all like this—especially you, Leap. But it will only be worse for you if I don't. Jinks isn't stupid, he'll find ways to hurt us all if I stay. He'll convince others it's their just cause, too. It's not fair. You should all move on—take Dash, and Slink if she wants to go, and find somewhere things are better."

Pace sighed. "Sounds like you've made your mind up," he said. "Is there any point in me arguing with you? Where will you go if you're not with us? What will you do?"

"Try to resolve things," Stride said. "Properly. My past . . . it isn't behind me. It's *following* me, and I can't move on until I know it's put to rest. Flicker and Jinks both."

"All right, then," Pace said. He walked up to Stride and headbutted him so hard that Stride saw stars. "I missed you, old friend. I'll miss you again. Maybe when your . . . your business is done, whatever it is, you can come and find us."

"I will," said Stride. "Thank you for taking me in and showing me that there is something more, when I'm ready for it. Good luck, all of you. Tell Jinks, if you see him again, that I'm not with you anymore, but I'm waiting for him to find me. And Pace—I hope you and Dash have many happy, healthy cubs and cover some distant, better land with cheetahs."

"I'll do my best." Pace chuckled.

Stride gave his friend one last headbutt for luck and then turned and sped off, pointing his nose into the lowering afternoon sun, not looking back.





## 14

*Breathstealer heaved a dramatic sigh.*

“If you don’t stop following me,” she said loudly to the apparently empty air in the shade of the swamp forest’s edge, “either I will eat you, or something else here will.”

There was a moment’s silence.

“No you won’t,” came the small voice from the bush at her heels. “You promised to look after me.”

“I did not,” Breathstealer snapped, spinning around and making a grab for the scruff of Cub’s neck. She lifted him out and deposited him on the ground in front of her. “I promised not to kill you or let any of my clan-

mates kill you while we're still bound by our promise to the pride. There is *plenty* of wiggle room there, and in any case, it's not me you need to be worried about in this place."

"What do you mean?" Cub asked, peering into the trees. "It's cooler here, and it smells . . . damp. Is there water?"

"Yes," said Breathstealer. "And insects, and disease, and creatures that will gobble a little lion cub up whole . . ." She thought about telling him the truth, that the Great Devourer itself would speak to her in this place. But she wondered if he even knew what the Devourer was, in the same way she did. What did lions tell their cubs about death? She wanted him frightened, not curious, or argumentative. So in the end she said, "And ghosts. Did your pride ever tell you the story of Grandmother?"

"The giant snake?" said Cub.

"It's said that the ghost of Grandmother haunts this forest. You can hear her slithering between the trees, and if she catches you, she'll wrap you up in invisible coils made of shadow and wind and squeeze the life out of you."

Cub looked horrified for a moment. Then his eyes narrowed. "So why are *you* going in?"

"Hyena business," Breathstealer said. "You do *not* want to know. Believe me."

"So . . . so what do I do?" Cub asked nervously. "I don't want to walk back by myself—and I didn't want to be there anyway, if you were gone. . . ."

Breathstealer rolled her eyes. "Get up in one of these trees. Come on, I'll give you a boost." She let the little cub scramble up onto her back, then up her neck onto her head, and finally he got his claws into the trunk of a tree and made it up to the crook of a branch. "You'll be safe enough there for the moment. Stay out of sight. Look out for snakes."

Cub whimpered to himself as she left, and she couldn't help letting out a small giggle at his worry. Perhaps it was cruel, but imagining him searching the dim trees for massive ghost snakes was still pretty entertaining.

She was heading in and down, treading the same path toward the deeper swamp, when she realized something was not the same. A trail of ants had joined her path and seemed to be moving in the same direction she was—and it wasn't just one type of ant. There were red and black ants together, large glistening bodies and tiny scurrying ones. They moved as if they were

all one colony with one aim—except that once in a while, the line would veer and snake around a cluster of dead ants or a pile of ant bodies still writhing with furious violence, as if a small number of ants had suddenly woken from a trance, realized they were walking with their enemies, and decided to tear one another apart.

*This is not natural*, she thought. *This is the Devourer's work.*

The ants did not turn toward the swamp but instead led into the trees, and Breathstealer followed them. They wound up a slight incline into undergrowth so dense with bare twigs and spiderwebs that Breathstealer had to stomp and tear her way through. At last her muzzle broke through into an emptier space—and she saw a massive ants' nest, a partially collapsed tower of dirt riddled with holes, with ants of all kinds swarming in and out of them in a frenzy of activity.

As she watched, hypnotized, she heard the voice.

*Breathstealer*, it said. *My claws in the heart of Bravelands. Tell me of the clan in the wake of our enemy's destruction.*

"They are coming around," Breathstealer said proudly. "They fear me, and I think they will follow me and bow to you when you ask them."

*You . . . think?* said the Devourer, and its voice dropped lower, rumbling in the earth. Some of the ants fell from the crumbling tower and twitched on the ground below, as if they were larger animals falling from some great height. Breathstealer's fur suddenly prickled with alarm.

"They will," she said quickly. "I'll make sure of it. Nosebiter's still—I mean—she doesn't hear your voice, she doesn't know the full enormity of you like I do. . . ."

*Is she a problem?* the Great Devourer said.

"No!" Breathstealer gasped.

*Because if she is*, it went on, and the earth under Breathstealer's paws suddenly began to crumble and shift, as more ants, and beetles, and small worms pushed their way up from below, *we must destroy her.*

Panic gripped Breathstealer. Had the Devourer prepared a trap for her, like it had for Hidetearer? Was it prepared to kill her at any time, despite everything she'd already done and promised?

"There's no need," Breathstealer said forcefully. "She's a better leader than I would be. We're better off with her in charge and me in her ear, whispering your words."

She did not beg. She knew it would not avail her. The Devourer's temper would only flare again, and even if she lived, Nosebiter might not. She held her ground, refused to move her paws from the shifting earth even as the worms crawled up and over them, and pretended not to be afraid.

*Some still doubt me, the Devourer growled, after all I have provided! There was a time when the call of the hyenas struck terror into the hearts of all who walked Bravelands. Lions and elephants ran in horror when they heard my servants' laughter. That time will come again if you do as I ask. Drown in blood all those who doubt us! Fill your belly full of stones so that their bites shatter their teeth!*

The ants began to twitch and shudder again.

*A hyena clan should be like a swarm, the Devourer said, and the fighting died down, the ants returning to their seemingly hypnotized collaboration. When it works as one, with a common goal, it can be more powerful than any pride of selfish lions or even a herd of brutish buffalo.*

Breathstealer wished her clan were like that—but even with Hidetearer and Skullcracker gone and Nosebiter in charge, she could hardly imagine them working together to do much, except hunt and find excuses to argue and fight one another.

"I will do as you ask," Breathstealer promised, though she sincerely hoped it would not ask her to literally fill her own belly with stones. "Tell me your will, and I will make it happen."

*Our enemies are compromised, said the Great Devourer. But even injured prey can strike back, and they may strike harder in their desperation. The Great Spirit, it said with a contempt in its voice that filled Breathstealer with nausea, is trying to devise a way to restore control, to take away what little power I have managed to scrounge among the pathetic dregs of Bravelands.*

Breathstealer forced herself to hold her tongue, despite being sure he meant her and her clan.

*For generations, the Spirit has deceived the creatures of this place, the Devourer went on. It claims that upholding its pointless Code will buy creatures its favor, eternal rest when they have died, even order while they live. An empty promise. Observe those who have come to me: the Codebreakers, each stronger than the last. Death and defeat are no dishonor to them. Their purpose is not to win, but to bring greater suffering*

*and death than ever before. My champions, my tools. Stinger, Grandmother, Titan, and so many, so very many before them.*

*And the Spirit—what are its champions? The Great Parents, handing down orders for peace in a world that is nothing but war. Stumbling ineptly from one crisis to another.*

*But when I am manifest, when I can truly bring my will to bear upon the world, every creature will die and kill and live and spawn and die, and peace will never again be seen in these lands.*

*And you, Breathstealer. No more quiet yearning for power, no more babysitting lion cubs. You will stand at my side and assist in the great work, the undoing of the cursed morality that the pretender Spirit has used to squeeze the hearts of Bravelands into tiny, unnatural forms.*

The voice washed over Breathstealer, and she felt the ground beneath her paws solidify again. She couldn't focus on every word, or really recall the ones that had passed—she could only sense the power coursing through her, the swelling pride as she imagined every hyena—every creature—in Bravelands turning to her, following her. What did she care if there was war? Of course there would be, there was *always* war. The only difference she could see would be that the hyenas would be on top for once. . . .

*You ask for my orders, yet you have no army to carry them out, the Great Devourer said. I will give you the simplest task: protect the entrance to my realm, which lies within this forest. The earth of Bravelands dries and cracks, and my faithful Codebreakers clamber ever closer to the surface world, but they are not yet ready to emerge. Protect the entrance, prevent the Spirit's slaves from interrupting the work. Can you manage that, Cub?*

"I can," Breathstealer said firmly.

*It should not be difficult, the Devourer said with a satisfaction that sat warm and heavy and squirming in Breathstealer's chest. The Mother is distracted, feuding with the buffalo, who do my work without ever realizing it. Each of them as dim and brutish as the other—when they have threatened and postured and starved themselves to death, we will be ready. Bravelands is on the precipice of chaos, the Great Devourer went on. It will not take much for us to tip it over the edge.*



*“I should have gone with them!”* Whisper blurted out, for the third or fourth time since Echo had left with Stonehide. They had gone just as the sun was setting, and Whisper had spent a restless and repetitive night: twitching awake with a chill dread, realizing Echo was gone, panicking and then remembering, feeling the guilt and regret settle over her. Every second that passed weighed on her heart, as if someone were piling stones down on top of her.

Now the sun was rising, and the heat with it, and something was wrong. She was absolutely sure of it. She couldn’t say what it was, but she could feel it from her hooves to the tips of her horns.

Beside her, Quake roused and blinked. "What?"

"I should have gone after Echo," Whisper insisted. "I can't think why I didn't just *go*! I let you all talk me out of it. I let him wander off with that honey badger—they're strong, but they're tiny. How can one of them protect Echo from Holler, or from predators for that matter? The lions and the cheetahs and leopards and the wolves and hyenas, they're getting as hungry as the grass-eaters are, and . . ."

"He told you not to go with him," Quake said. "And you did what he asked. No shame in that."

"There is if he dies!" Whisper retorted miserably. "There is if he needed me and I'm not there."

"They aren't planning to fight their way through the herd," Quake said. "They're going to sneak around. Stonehide's the perfect companion for that. They'll make it past Holler, I'm sure."

"And after that?" Whisper asked. "Do you really think that they'll find this—this hole into the underworld—and find Bellow and the Way, and then get back out alive?"

"It was *your* plan," Quake reminded her. She felt like he'd gored her, and she gave him a furious look.

"You're worried," he said gently. "Who wouldn't be? We have to hold on to hope, don't we?"

Whisper sighed deeply, and they fell into a tense, sad silence.

The eerie, wrong feeling crept back into her stomach, and she realized what it was.

"It's too quiet," she said. "It's dawn—where are all the other animals? The petitioners? It's usually getting crowded by now!"

"Maybe . . . maybe they all decided Starlight has nothing to offer them?" Quake said, but his voice wavered with uncertainty.

Whisper got up and looked around, and she pushed through the trees to the clearing.

There was nobody there. No clamoring animals here to seek Great Mother's advice, and no Great Mother either. Not a single creature, except for a few small birds, emerging from their nests and looking around curiously. Whisper imagined they were thinking the same thing she was.

"Where did everyone go?" she breathed. "Starlight? Great Mother?"

But there was no answer. Whisper's own breathing seemed to rasp loudly in her throat in the quiet of the clearing—it was peaceful, even

beautiful, but it was *wrong*.

She heard footsteps, yelped, and stomped around to see Grass the baboon approaching across the clearing.

“Whisper, Quake. Good morning,” said Grass.

“Grass, what’s going on? Where did everybody go? Where’s Starlight?”

Grass slowly and methodically climbed up onto a fallen tree trunk, right at the edge of the clearing, and sat down. Whisper hurried over, dismayed by his lack of urgency.

“Grass? Are you all right? What’s *happening*?”

Grass took a deep and deliberate breath. “Great Mother Starlight asked me to remain here,” he said. “Partly so that I could try to dissuade you from asking that question.”

Whisper and Quake exchanged looks—Quake seemed purely mystified, but Whisper felt a mounting dread in her heart.

“Why? Where has she gone?” she repeated.

“Great Mother asked me to tell you,” Grass said again, achingly slowly, so slowly that Whisper started to suspect that he was actively stalling for time. “That you will not benefit from hearing about it, and to please trust her. Great Mother says that you should be protected—that even without Echo, you too are special. You’ve done so much. You are already a hero, Whisper.”

“What has she done?” Whisper demanded.

“What do *you* want to say to us, Grass?” Quake said suddenly, his eyes narrowing. “You’ve told us what Great Mother said. You’ve done your duty and relayed your message. What do *you* want to say? We won’t tell her it was you who told us.”

Grass heaved a sigh. “I . . . I wish that I could have gone with her,” he said mournfully. “I wish she had not given me this duty, but I’m determined to do it as well as I can, even if I don’t entirely agree with it. I could tell you,” he went on, “that Great Mother could not sleep last night after Echo left, and that she left soon after him. That the other animals all followed her, but she gave strict orders not to wake you. I could tell you that she’s gone to speak with Holler at the watering hole, but that would be Grass Highleaf the baboon, Grass the worried friend, speaking. Not Grass the Great Mother’s adviser and servant.”

“I understand,” Whisper gasped. “Quake, let’s go!”



“She’s right that you’ll be in danger,” Grass called out as they turned to leave. “She’s right that you would be putting yourself at risk, perhaps for no reason.”

“He’s sort of right,” Quake said. “You may not be able to help her, and Holler won’t hesitate to hurt you if he thinks it’ll serve his own interests. . . .”

Whisper flinched. “Maybe not, but Echo is gone, and I already regret that I didn’t follow him, so I’m going. I can’t do *anything* by staying here. Are you coming with me?”

“Of course,” said Quake. “Come on, Grass, are you going or staying?”

“I . . . think I should stay,” said Grass. He lowered his voice almost to a miserable whisper. “I think I may yet be needed here.”

Whisper frowned, not understanding what he could possibly be needed for in the empty clearing—was he a coward? But there wasn’t time to stand around and puzzle it out. They left, following the elephant tracks, emerging out onto the plain as the sun burst over the horizon, throwing dazzling beams of light across Bravelands, casting long and ominous shadows.

They came across the first of the Great Mother’s petitioners not too far from the forest—a pair of sickly, tired-looking gazelles who were trudging sadly toward them.

“Oh yes,” one said when Whisper asked if they’d seen Starlight. “She’s at the Gathering, by the watering hole.”

“We couldn’t stay to watch,” said the other. Whisper and Quake exchanged frantic glances and broke into a clattering run.

Whisper hadn’t left the forest in a couple of days, since her ill-fated mission to meet Thunder, and in that short time, Bravelands had noticeably deteriorated. The earth under their hooves was cracked and broken—the cracks weren’t wide, but some of them looked strangely deep. The darkness inside felt too dark, the pattern of them weirdly hypnotic as Whisper’s hooves danced and pounded over them. She almost tripped once, and after that she kept her gaze locked on the horizon, on the distant smudged shadow of the watering hole, rather than look down and see more of those cracks.

The smudge became a shadow, and the shadows resolved into animals and the dead skeletons of trees. Whisper could see Great Mother now, standing on one side of the muddy puddle that had once been the great watering hole, with a small number of elephants at her back. She was

addressing the saddest Great Gathering Whisper had ever seen. Not an animal there looked healthy, not even the buffalo who crowded the other bank. Even Holler looked thinner than he used to, and his glossy black-brown hair was matted and dull. But if Holler looked a little run-down, many of the other animals seemed on the verge of death. And some, she realized, with a sick horror that turned her stomach, had already died. They lay around the edges of the watering hole, half-eaten by crocodiles and scavengers.

They'd come to Holler looking for mercy and had found only death. And now it looked like Starlight had made the same mistake.

"... has not abandoned us, despite our dire circumstances," she was saying to her parched and miserable audience. "We have been deceived, manipulated, by a force beyond death. But the Great Spirit has acted to protect us, even so, and I must do the same."

She walked away from the elephants, stepping carefully among the other animals, and began to circle the watering hole. She was approaching the buffalo. Whisper wanted to yell out, *No, whatever you're doing, it's not worth it.*

But the true sight of Bravelands' pitiful state had shaken her. The bodies around the watering hole, the cracks snaking across the earth. What if Great Mother was right? What if it *was* worth it?

"Remember Echo," Quake whispered beside her. "Maybe she's just buying him time."

"I hope so," Whisper hissed back.

Great Mother Starlight had reached the first of the buffalo, and they were standing aside, letting her approach Holler. Whisper crept closer.

"In these times, pride is a pointless treasure we must dispose of, before it's taken from us," said Great Mother Starlight as she reached Holler. "I have searched my heart and consulted the Great Spirit, and I have reached a decision. The buffalo herd are now the official Guardians of the Watering Hole—and Holler, noble leader of the buffalo, will act as deputy Great Parent."

*No!* Whisper clenched her jaw against another cry of horror. Starlight couldn't possibly think this was a good idea? It was completely absurd!

Holler looked disgustingly pleased with himself as Starlight reached up and laid her trunk gently on his horns. He beamed at her and then out at the crowd.

“He thinks he’s won,” Quake muttered.

“Unless Echo finds a way to speak to ghosts,” Whisper breathed, “he *has* won.”

“Great Mother,” Holler said, faking a humble bow, “I am honored beyond words. My thanks, on behalf of myself and the whole buffalo herd, for your trust in this matter. I’m sure that together we can make sure that everyone has enough to see us through this difficult time. I pledge my loyalty to you, to the Great Spirit, and to all of Bravelands.”

The words were so hollow they gave Whisper vertigo.

“And now let us drink,” Holler said. “Let us all drink!”

A ripple of excitement ran through the animals at the watering hole. Ears pricked up and eyes glinted that had not done so in days. Several creatures started getting up and moving toward the water, not waiting for any further instruction—and then retreated again as swarms of crocodiles waited just at the waterline, grinning their long, patient grins.

“Great Mother Starlight, please take the first sip,” said Holler. “And afterward, we will open up space for others.”

Starlight stepped carefully through the mud to the water, pausing for a moment, staring at a small pod of crocodiles who lurked nearby. Whisper remembered suddenly that she could speak their language. Was she saying something to them now? If she did, what would they be saying in return?

She reached down and delicately scooped a dribble of water with her trunk, delivering it to her mouth, and then raised her trunk and trumpeted, a celebratory sound that rang out, lonely and false, across the plains.

At last, some male buffalo began to move into the water, stomping and bullying the crocodiles aside, and small groups of other animals were escorted down to the water to drink for a few scant moments before the buffalo moved them on again.

As the waves of drinkers came and went, Great Mother Starlight walked away from Holler, turning her back on the watering hole, and almost nobody seemed to even notice her go. Whisper’s own mouth was dry, but neither she nor Quake could risk going among the buffalo right now. She nudged him and muttered, “I’m going after Starlight.”

Quake nodded, and together they did their best to slink around the crowd, trying not to draw too much attention to themselves as they gradually adjusted their course to meet the Great Mother a little way from the watering hole.

She startled when she saw them, and her ears twitched sadly. “Oh, my friends. I wish you had not come.”

“Grass tried to stop us,” said Whisper. “But he couldn’t exactly stand in front of two buffalo and get trampled, could he? We figured out where you’d gone ourselves.”

It was a small, pointless lie, but in a strange way it made Whisper feel better. Grass deserved not to be blamed for this—and it felt nice to be able to be loyal to someone or something, when all the loyalties of Bravelands were being turned upside down.

“Why did you do it?” she asked Starlight. “Please, tell me you don’t plan to actually trust him!”

Great Mother Starlight sighed. “I had no choice. Look at the watering hole, Whisper. I have bought all these creatures access to the water that is their right—at least for today. More would have died while I sat in my safe, shady forest and pretended to have any other answers. It was the right thing to do, for now. Holler holds the world to ransom, and I’ll pay the price. Nobody else can.”

“But you’ll be careful,” Whisper said. “Right?”

“I will,” said Starlight. “And if we are very lucky, I won’t need to be for long. Great Spirit guide his hoofsteps in the dark places,” she added, closing her eyes and raising her trunk a little. But she clearly couldn’t bring herself to make too big a motion. To Whisper, the Great Mother suddenly looked very old, even for an elephant. She might have saved lives and bought Echo more time—but she looked like she had been utterly defeated.

Behind her, at the watering hole, the mood was jubilant. A great stamping and bellowing went up from the buffalo, as Holler raised his horns high and watched over the watering hole—*his* watering hole, in *his* plains—with a look of imperious triumph.



## 16

*Stride curled up, shivering slightly, in a hollow between two rocks. The ground radiated back the heat it had soaked up during the day, so despite the black, star-dusted sky he wasn't exactly cold—but he still felt unable to shake a strange shudder that ran up and down his spine and made him curl tighter around his paws.*

*Flicker isn't up there.*

The thought was like a broken tooth or a thorn in his paw; he just kept worrying at it, turning it over and over in his mind.

*She should be there, with our ancestors. My mother and father are up there somewhere. My brother Fleet too. The legendary cheetahs of old, the*

*Great Parents and every creature who kept to the Code . . . the sky is so full of spirits. I don't understand it, but I believe it.*

But now he knew that there was somewhere else, somewhere grim and gray, where swarms of bugs played cruel tricks. Flicker was trapped there—and many more.

*Are they waiting for us to free them? Could we do it?* Stride wondered. *Or are they stuck there forever, in the company of the Great Devourer, until the end of everything?*

He closed his eyes, blocking out the stars that almost seemed to mock him. He didn't think he would sleep, but he kept his eyes shut as long as he could, and the next time he opened his eyes, the stars had shifted, and the sky was faintly blue along the eastern edge of the horizon.

He dozed uneasily until the sun was burning the clouds away in streaks of blazing pink and gold. He didn't feel exactly rested, but he supposed it was time for him to get up and continue his journey back to the Great Mother. He didn't know what he would do when he got there, only that he had to find a way to do something. And as he stood up again, he cast around himself, sniffing and searching for any traces of prey, and sure enough he saw something moving on the horizon, silhouetted against the sunrise. A humped shape with horns. He thought it was a buffalo—but what was it doing away from its herd? And what were those little flying things around its head—flies? Or birds?

He squinted, and as he did, another shadow came into focus beside the first. This one was smaller. An adult buffalo and its calf? No, the small shadow seemed *too* small—and the big one was not that large either. He crept up to a bent tree, stripped of all vegetation, but thick enough in the trunk that he could conceal himself there while he watched the shadows approach.

Then he stepped out of his hiding place with a cry of surprise and gladness.

"Stonehide!" he shouted, breaking into a gentle, loping run.

He saw the smaller figure—the honey badger—startle and assume a defensive, angry pose.

"Don't bother attacking," he growled back. "I'll rip out your guts, and my friend here will stomp your bones into dust!"

The buffalo, which was only a bit bigger than Stride himself, yelped and backed away at first, and the flock of oxpeckers that rode on his back took

off in a cloud of cheeping and flapping. Then he seemed to pull himself together and put his horns down as if to charge.

“Stonehide, it’s me!” Stride called out.

“Stride? Bless me, it is. It’s all right, Echo—this is a friend.”

“Oh!” the little buffalo said. “Yes, I recognize him now. You were living with the Great Mother too.”

Stride bounded up to them, his heart feeling light.

“What on earth are you two doing out here by yourselves?” he asked.

“Depends,” said Stonehide, sniffing. “Are you alone? Where’s the rest of your new coalition? Missing my scintillating company already, are you?”

“Actually, yes,” Stride said. “But that’s not why I’m here. I’ve left the coalition. I wasn’t ready—I have to see this through, with Flicker and the Great Devourer and all of it. I’m heading back to the Great Mother now, although . . . my question stands, what are you two up to?”

Stonehide and Echo exchanged looks, eyebrows, ears, and muzzles twitching with silent communication. The oxpeckers gradually landed on Echo’s horns and back, and most of them seemed to fix Stride with a slightly unnerving stare.

“Well . . . remember when you got swallowed by a hole in the ground and ended up in the land of death?” said Stonehide.

Stride recoiled, chuckling nervously. “Baldly put. And yes. It was horrible, and I’m never going back there.”

“Unfortunately,” said Stonehide, “it seems all our fates might rely on it.”

“I need to speak to Bellow, the last leader of the herd,” the buffalo princeling explained solemnly. “I need him to teach me the Way so I can take the herd on its proper migration and the rains can come back. And once the rains come back, the Devourer will have less of a hold on Bravelands, and things will be more in balance.” He took a breath. “That’s the plan, anyway.”

It sounded like a tall order to Stride, but he didn’t let his doubts show on his face.

“So are you coming?” asked Stonehide.

Stride’s gut told him to turn down the offer. Black Branches had been terrifying, and he was lucky he’d found his way out alive the last time they’d visited. But in the buffalo’s liquid eyes lurked a fire that belied his

years. And despite Stonehide's casual invitation, Stride knew full well he was imploring him beneath the gruff exterior.

"Well, obviously," he said at last.

The sinister forest was just as dark and damp as the last time they visited, from the outside still looking more like a stain on the earth than a forest. There were more scents, though—and most of them were from hyenas. It wasn't just Breathstealer this time.

"What do you think?" Stride asked Stonehide. "I smell at least six, males and females."

"I think more," said Stonehide darkly. "I'd bet on eight. Maybe they're just looking for water." The tone was hopeful rather than reassuring. Stride knew if they ran into that many hyenas eager for a fight, retreat would be the only option.

Echo began to walk more slowly, nostrils twitching every few steps. While Stonehide could slip under and between the twisting thorns, and Stride could leap and squeeze around and over them, Echo had no choice but to push through. It was noisy, and his long hairs caught on twigs, his hooves stumbling over the uneven ground. The oxpeckers flitted from tree to tree, picking flying insects out of the air. Stride tried not to think about the swarm in the tunnels, the not-Flicker that had chased him.

"We won't be able to sneak up on anyone like this," Stonehide muttered. "If those hyenas get in our way, better be prepared for a scrap."

"I'll go ahead," Stride said. "I can climb up through the trees, there're plenty of branches."

"If you insist," said Stonehide. "Maybe you and I should stay put for the moment then, Echo."

Echo nodded, visibly relieved, and leaned against a tree trunk.

Stride scrambled up into the same tree, slipping between the branches, testing each one with a paw before he put all his weight on it. Each branch was blanketed in vines and moss and dangling insect nests, and some of them were rotten, too. But he found himself a winding path into the forest, heading for the rough area where he remembered finding the clearing and the tunnel.

He located it, but unfortunately not just because of his own brilliant memory and sense of direction. Every time he followed a familiar sight, the hyena-scent grew stronger, and when he turned his nose toward the hyenas,



the trees grew slightly thinner and finally opened out to the same strange grassy opening, with the same stunted and twisted trees standing around the deep, black hole with the thick green vines snaking out—or in?—like veins or tentacles or something else he couldn't even name.

Sure enough, the clearing was full of hyenas. Mostly males, with a female or two lounging in their midst. If they'd been sent to guard this place, the females would be the commanders.

Stride shuddered. It wasn't the female hyenas' attitude to the males that freaked him out—plenty of animals built their communities around their matriarchs and patriarchs, and either kept the two separate or had other strange rules about when and how they interacted. No, it was the males themselves who gave Stride the creeps. They often seemed not just willing, but almost *excited* to follow their females' orders, to throw themselves into any danger and die in their dozens. What kind of life produced that level of twisted loyalty?

The hyenas in the clearing at first appeared just to be sitting around, enjoying the damp grass—but as Stride watched, he saw ears twitching, eyes scanning the forest undergrowth. And after a few more moments, several of them got up, walked a little in a circular pattern around the entrance, and sat back down.

*A patrol. A well-organized one, too. Whoever's in charge here really doesn't want anyone getting to that tunnel.*

Maybe there was something to the theory this place was special.

*If the Great Devourer is protecting that place, is she really here? Is Stonehide's mate down there too, and Bellow, and thousands more who shouldn't be? And if the Devourer doesn't want us going in . . . does that mean maybe, just maybe, we can get them out again?*

Stride couldn't see the one called Breathstealer, though. He wondered where she was—and how far the Great Devourer's rotten influence had already spread in the hyena clan.

He made his way back to the others and dropped down beside them with a sigh.

"At least twelve," he told Stonehide. "Mostly males, some females—we can't fight them head-on. Even with all three of us, there're too many."

"Well, I'm all for stampeding them," Stonehide said. "Let our big friend here use those hooves of his. . . ."

“I don’t—I don’t think I can . . . ,” Echo stammered. “I’m not a fighter. I know I’m big, but they eat buffalo my size all the time. Last time I saw a big group of hyenas like this, they forced me off a cliff and I almost died,” he said in a small voice.

“That’s right,” said Stride. “There are too many, even if you were a full-grown adult.”

“And we can’t sneak through?” Stonehide asked.

“Not a chance. They’re guarding the tunnel, I’m sure of it.”

Echo sighed. “I can’t fight—but I can’t turn back, either. I need to get in there. And if they’re guarding this tunnel, that might be really good news. That says to me there’s something in there that the Great Devourer doesn’t want anyone to get to.”

“You’re not wrong.” Stride nodded. “We’ll just have to be cleverer than them.”

“Which shouldn’t be hard,” Stonehide added. “What we need is a distraction. . . .”



*Cub's muzzle was completely covered with stringy pieces of muscle and fat* as he plunged his nose right into the marrow of the gazelle leg Breathstealer had let him chew on. He ate as if he thought someone would take his food at any moment. Or as if he was starving or expecting this to be his last meal. Of course, she realized, any and all of these could be true.

"You can chew more slowly," she said. "Nobody's going to steal it."

"Mmf," said Cub, sinking his teeth into the bone and giving it a good chew. "You don't know that."

He did slow down just a little, but he kept throwing glances around.

They were finishing off prey that Breathstealer had found, abandoned half in and half out of a dried-up watering hole. She wasn't sure what had killed the gazelle, but animals had been panicking, running off from their herds and dying of hunger or thirst all over the plains in the last few days. More gifts from the Great Devourer.

It smelled fine, so it was hers now. Hers and Cub's.

Something moved in her peripheral vision, and she looked around quickly, fearing the crocodiles—or maybe other predators, or even furious herbivores maddened by thirst.

But it wasn't a creature she saw as she tilted her head to the side—it was a swarm of flies, crawling over the corpse of a small, flat, unappetizing frog.

A small part of Breathstealer sighed and silently muttered, *What now?*

But even that small rebellion felt incredibly dangerous, and Breathstealer quickly turned her attention to the flies, waiting to see if they were about to deliver a message from the Devourer, or if they were—for once—simply flies.

But no—they began to part and shift around the frog's face, its empty eye sockets. Breathstealer felt dizzy, as if she was looking not into the skull of a dead thing, but into a deep hole. At the bottom, there was a glimmer of light. It sparked, flashed, and then burst across her vision, and when it passed, she saw pale brown grass and red earth. One towering tree: the baobab tree.

She heard shouts. Screams. Yelps of pain. She smelled blood.

*A traitor*, said the voice of the Great Devourer, in a whisper that chilled her bones. *You are betrayed.*

*Run.*

She snapped back to herself. She was in the real world, in the blazing sun, with Cub worrying at the gazelle leg in front of him. . . .

And within her, a sudden certainty that something was happening back at the baobab tree. Something very bad.

"We're leaving," she said, stumbling up to her paws. Her heart pounded in her ears so loud that it was hard to hear herself think, let alone speak.

"What?" said Cub, his mouth still full.

"Drop it and run, we have to go back."

She didn't wait for him to obey her. He'd catch up. He wasn't her responsibility, anyway. She had to get back to Nosebiter. To the clan and to

her sister. The plains seemed to stretch out in front of her, an endless rolling sea of grass and earth, dragging out the space between her and her clan.

*Great Devourer! she thought frantically, lend me speed, lend me strength—give me wings to fly if you can! Just get me there!*

She did hear Cub scrambling after her, gasping for breath as he struggled to keep up. She could neither encourage nor dissuade him, she didn't have the energy to spare. She could focus only on running.

The baobab's uppermost branches came into view at last as they crested a small hill, and a moment later Breathstealer skidded to a halt, kicking up dust, barely avoiding running straight over the hyena who lay in front of her, bleeding heavily from the chest. It was a male. He was dying.

"What happened?" Breathstealer gasped.

"They . . . they waited. Till the patrol had left for Black Branches," winced the male, his breath shallow and his words slurred. "And then they walked right in, and they attacked. . . ."

"Who did?" Breathstealer demanded.

"Lions," whispered the male. "Slypride."

Breathstealer turned, looked back at the small, tawny-furred shape still sprinting to catch up with her. It made no sense.

*We kept him safe, I don't understand.*

She leaped over the dying male and sprinted for the tree.

*Nosebiter, please. Nosey, be all right, please. . . .*

The base of the tree rose into view over the hill, and Breathstealer let out a keening cry.

Hyenas, and parts of hyenas, were strewn around the roots of the tree. There were also survivors—she could see them moving among the rest, licking their wounds.

But there, right in the center, was a familiar hyena pelt. A young female with a swollen belly.

"No!"

The survivors twitched and looked up as Breathstealer's shriek split the air. They stood aside quickly as she stumbled to her sister's side and fell to her knees.

Nosebiter was gone. Her body was stiffening and growing cold, her fur matted with blood. She had several broken teeth, still bared in a furious snarl. One eye was open and completely blood-red, and the side of her skull seemed to have struck something hard and crunched inward.

Breathstealer reached out and put a paw on her sister's belly, but it was too still. Too cold.

*Another one.* Another cub gone, robbed of any chance at life, this one before it ever even smelled the air or tasted its mother's milk.

Breathstealer threw her head back and let out a long, hoarse scream. She pressed her muzzle under Nosebiter's chin. Her older sister, who'd protected her when she could, who'd tried to lead the clan with wisdom, who'd suffered so much grief—and for what? So that some mange-ridden lion could come and end it all, revenge for something she didn't even do.

"*There it is!*" one of the survivors screeched. It was Spinesnapper, walking with a limp and slurring her words, but still up and spitting with fury. "There's the cub!"

"Kill it!" roared a male hyena.

Breathstealer turned and saw Cub stumbling to a halt just outside the ring of bloody chaos, staring in horror. His tiny ears flattened in terror, his whole small body shaking.

*It's a lion,* said a voice in her head—not the genuine voice of the Devourer, but a part of herself that sounded a lot like it. *It will grow to be your enemy, and it will kill your cubs, and the cycle will go on forever. And why should you care? Life is death and death is life, and that is all there is.*

And yet, she found herself springing to her paws and throwing herself between Cub and the gang of murderous hyenas.

"Spinesnapper, enough! Haven't you had enough?" she spat. "Isn't this enough blood for you?"

"That *thing* is responsible for this," Spinesnapper growled. "It told Slypride to attack. It was a trick the whole time!"

"I'm sorry!" Cub squealed. "They were going to kill me!"

Breathstealer rounded on him and with a descending paw pinned him to the ground. His little body writhed. "What? *They*? The lions?"

Cub managed to nod. He squeezed shut his eyes and turned his head away, bracing himself for the bite that would end it all. "It was a t-t-trick all along," he confessed. "I'm not Sly's cub. I'm Noble's."

"The old pride leader," said Skullcracker, rolling her eyes. "Devourer's *claws*, of course you are."

"Right. So Sly doesn't give a monkey's fingernail what happens to you, does he?" Breathstealer prompted.

“N-no,” said Cub in a small voice. “They killed my littermates. They kept me alive in case I was useful. And then Sly . . . he said if I came here and pretended to be his, maybe I could live. But if I told you the truth you would kill me, and if I ran away he would kill me, and . . . so you’d think you were safe . . . I didn’t know when he was going to attack, I thought if I was good enough, he might rescue me. . . .”

He trailed off, and there was a heavy pause as it all settled in. Breathstealer loosened her hold on the small lion.

“We ate your father,” commented one of the others with cold cruelty. “And we’ll do the same to you and the rest of your pride.”

“Sly, yes,” Breathstealer said. “I will destroy him and every lion who helped him kill my sister. Not the cub.”

“Stand aside, Breathstealer,” Spinesnapper growled.

“No,” said Breathstealer. She opened her mouth to explain, but then she closed it again and simply stared into Spinesnapper’s eyes. She didn’t need to explain herself. She had said it was so, and let the others be the ones to make their arguments to her for once.

Spinesnapper tilted her head and winced in pain. “If you like,” she said. “Keep the scrap. Fatten it up. Whatever. What I want to know is, what do we do next?”

“Nosebiter’s dead,” said Eyegouger. “We need a leader.”

“You have one,” said Breathstealer flatly.

Spinesnapper snorted, a fleck of blood spattering on the ground as she did so. “*You*? No offense, Breathstealer, but you’re *cursed*. Fate hasn’t been kind to your family the last two times they led this clan. It’s time for a change. I’m older, more experienced, and—”

With a crunching sound, the ground underneath Spinesnapper’s paws cracked open. She yelped and danced back, hopping from paw to paw to try to keep herself upright. The tremor almost seemed to come as an afterthought, rolling under the plain as if something huge was moving through the earth. A branch cracked off the baobab and fell to the ground.

The quaking stopped, and silence fell. Spinesnapper looked down into the cracks she had just managed to avoid, and Breathstealer knew what she would see there—these were the Devourer’s work, and the darkness between the cracks would be too deep, too black, like an endless, starless night that promised no escape.

Every hyena—and Cub, peeking out between his paws—stared at Breathstealer.

“We have no time for posturing and arguments,” she said. “The Great Devourer has spoken. I will lead you all in vengeance, and through me, we will wield a power and respect no hyena has seen since the first days. Trust me or fear me, I don’t care. But you will offer your throats to me. *Now.*”

There was another long pause. Spinesnapper, still wide-eyed and trembling, was the first to kneel in front of Breathstealer, exposing her throat. Breathstealer gave her a nod of satisfaction and respect. Hidetearer or Skullcracker would have fought her for the sake of their own pride and only delayed their revenge.

But Hidetearer and Skullcracker were dead.

“I drink your blood,” Breathstealer said, putting her muzzle to Spinesnapper’s throat.

“My blood is yours to drink,” Spinesnapper replied.

One by one, the hyenas each pledged their lives to her, and with each one Breathstealer heard, or maybe felt, a stronger and stronger buzzing inside her head.

Her clan. Her swarm. They were united, for now.

As the last hyena got up from offering her its throat, she saw it look over her shoulder and back off, stumbling with fear. She turned, deliberately and without fear, to face the swarm of flying ants that had poured out of the ground like smoke.

She lay prostrate before it. It was as if the Great Devourer had waited for the perfect moment to show itself to the clan, to reinforce her rule.

“The tunnel is guarded,” she said. “And now we require our revenge. Help us find Slypride and send their spirits to swell your armies.”

“*Breathstealer,*” said the Great Devourer, and she heard yelps and whimpers from the hyenas behind her, and realized that they could all hear the voice too. Her power had grown, or *its* had—it didn’t matter which. “*The lions are weak, cowardly. You can destroy the lions with a swipe of one claw. Your true enemy lies elsewhere.*”

Breathstealer tilted her head curiously. “Who is our true enemy, if not those who have murdered our families and betrayed our trust?” She suspected she knew its answer.

“*Sly was not the one who concocted this terrible trickery. Your enemy, the mind behind your loss, is the Great Spirit. The elephant Starlight*



*planted the idea in Sly's mind."*

A few of the hyenas behind Breathstealer gasped or muttered to one another. The lion cub too, still sitting at Breathstealer's paws, looked up at her with confusion and disbelief.

*"The Great Spirit has long disregarded the hyenas, and now it plots to wipe you out entirely,"* the voice of the Devourer said, through the buzzing of the ants' wings. *"But now it will learn the error of moving against us. Are you ready, Breathstealer? To become a creature so powerful that nothing can stand in your way? To wield control over life and death in Bravelands?"*

Breathstealer took a deep breath. She looked at Cub, at the cowering hyenas behind her, at the meat that had once been her sister, the messy ending that had come for the peace she had secretly craved.

"I am," she said. "I am yours to use."



*The sky roiled. Clouds covered the stars—at first, Whisper and Quake had looked up in desperate hope, wondering if it would finally rain.*

*Did Echo make it to Bellow already? Did he use the Way to bring the rains, without migrating at all?*

But no rain had fallen. The clouds hung dark and thick, high in the sky, as if they were waiting for something. The wind picked up, shaking the dry trees and picking up dust. Swirling tornadoes of sand and dust leaped up from the earth and blew away into pieces again just as quickly. Every so often, a burst of lightning would split the darkness open, and Whisper could smell smoke and see flickering fires on the horizon.

The night felt cursed, as if the sky itself was angry.

Starlight, Whisper, and Quake were walking, despite the furious weather. They were too heavy to be blown away, and having seen the beginnings of fires far off, Whisper suspected they were safer in the open than in the thick, dry forest. But she didn't feel safe. In the darkness she saw smaller creatures scurrying for shelter, birds whipped off course, their feathers shredded by clouds of biting sand.

They were walking to the elephant graveyard. Starlight had asked for their company, and Whisper had been honored, but in the back of her mind she fretted—what if Echo needed them and couldn't find them?

"He will be all right," Starlight assured her, but her words felt hollow to Whisper.

*She means, either he will win and emerge with the Way and everything will be all right,* Whisper thought, *or he will die and I'll never see him again anyway.*

She didn't blame Starlight for wanting to journey to the graveyard. If there was a place in Bravelands where Whisper could go, where the bones of her mothers and their mothers rested, where the wisdom and peace of their kind had been kept for countless years, she would have made the journey long before now. Starlight would commune with her elephant ancestors, and perhaps they would have guidance for her—or perhaps she would just feel comforted. Either way, Whisper agreed it was worth the trek. At this point, having secured at least *some* cooperation from Holler and sent Echo to right the greatest of Bravelands' wrongs, Starlight, she sensed, was at a loss as to what more she could do.

They reached the top of a slow incline to higher ground, and the wind roared in their ears and whipped up Whisper's and Quake's hair until it tangled in their eyes and around their horns. They tossed their heads to clear their vision, and Whisper saw that they were overlooking a river—perhaps even the same river that Echo had fallen into, though she wasn't quite sure. It was completely dried up, its contours and hidden channels hardened into muddy ridges. She could just make out the shapes of a few dead fish, lying where they had suffocated, heaps and tangles of reeds, and a huddle of gray bodies that she realized were those of a hippopotamus and her calf—she couldn't tell, from this distance, whether they were sleeping or dead.

"Do you see that?" Quake said suddenly. "Along the riverbed? I think I see mist!"

“Are you sure it’s not dust?” Whisper asked.

“No,” said Quake, “I don’t think so. Look how slow it’s moving.”

Whisper’s heart rose a little. If there was mist, there was moisture—maybe not rain, but enough dew that they could wet their dry mouths.

They walked along the top of the hill a little farther and then descended toward the river and into the mist. In this sheltered place, the wild wind died away, and the world suddenly turned quiet and gray.

As Whisper felt the coolness in the air, she breathed deep and held out her tongue, delighted by the feeling of dampness on her eyelids, the cracking skin around her nose and lips. It was wonderful. Starlight shook her head, her huge ears flapping, and gave the first purely happy smile Whisper had seen from her in a long time.

“When the true rains finally come,” she murmured, “I want you to remember to play, Whisper. Echo too, and you, Quake. There is nothing like a good puddle for playing in. You are growing up now, but the elephants know—it is never too late to play in a pool of water.”

Whisper and Quake looked at each other and chuckled. “We’ll try to remember,” Whisper promised.

As they pressed on, though, their mood grew heavy again. It was *very* dark now. They could see almost nothing ahead, and even though Whisper trusted Starlight’s sense of direction and long experience to lead them right, she didn’t like the sense of being adrift. She felt hemmed in. The mist was insubstantial, but that was almost worse than being trapped—she could bolt, stampede out of here, but any panicked flight would likely take her into danger.

The mist grew heavier too, and that *should* have been a good thing, but it became harder to breathe through it, and it clung to their hair and weighed them down, without ever turning to drinkable water.

“Are you sure we shouldn’t go back?” Quake asked. “If we head uphill, we can at least get out of this mist.”

“We won’t get lost,” Starlight reassured him gently. Whisper heard Quake sniff and wondered if that wasn’t quite what he meant.

In the dark and the fog, the sound of their breathing and their footfalls seemed very loud. Whisper grew so used to the gentle rhythm of them that when two more sets of steps joined the sound, she knew it at once, before she even saw the shapes moving in the mist ahead. One medium-size and one very small—she assumed it was a creature and its calf—but what

finally emerged from the curtain of mist and stood before them was much stranger. One hyena, and with her one tired-looking lion cub.

“Greetings, fellow night travelers,” said Starlight. “I hope you aren’t lost in this mist? If you are, you can walk with us until we leave it again.”

“That’s very kind of you,” said the hyena. “But we are not lost.” She stopped right in Starlight’s path, and Starlight stopped too. Whisper’s hide prickled, but she looked down at the cub, and it seemed absurd that this pair could wish them any harm. Yet there was something about this hyena. Though not large, its presence held a certain *weight*. In her experience, hyenas could be twitchy, furtive creatures, but this one seemed so solid and unperturbed.

Great Mother looked at them for a moment and then said, “I must assume that this is Cub, of Slypride? I’m glad to see you together. I hope this means that Sly took my advice and that the conflict between you is over? I rather wish some of my other guidance had gone down so well!”

The hyena bared her teeth, and Whisper took a deep breath, tensing.

“Bravelands has had its fill of the Great Spirit,” the hyena snarled. “And of you. My sister is dead because of your *advice*.”

“. . . oh. Tell me, my dear, are you Breathstealer?” Starlight said, as faintly as an elephant could say anything.

“I am,” said Breathstealer.

“I’m sorry to hear about your sister,” said Starlight. “I’m afraid I don’t know what happened. I thought if Cub here was still with you, then . . .”

“Your scheming worked out well,” Breathstealer sneered. “Sly placed this imposter in our clan, a cub he didn’t care about, telling us it was his. When we let our guard down, he attacked. My sister is dead, and many others. But if you were trying to wipe us out, you failed. I live, and I’m not the only one.”

“I didn’t . . . I was trying to . . .,” Starlight stammered for a moment.

“Great Mother wouldn’t do anything like that!” Whisper blurted out, frightened that Starlight’s hesitation would make her seem guilty.

“It is not what I intended,” Starlight said, finding her voice. “I suggested a swap—a cub for a cub, to keep the peace. It was no *scheme*—I have no wish to see hyenas destroyed! Breathstealer,” she added, reaching out with her trunk uncertainly. “You must believe me. I think someone has been lying to you. You’ve heard its voice, yes? The Great Devourer? It speaks to you in the Black Branches forest and in the voices of insects?”

Breathstealer pulled herself up taller. "Our master doesn't lie," she said. "Death is the only truthful thing in this horrible world."

"We should go," said Quake nervously, and Whisper nodded heartily. She glanced around them, but she couldn't see or hear anything in the fog.

"Death is inevitable," Starlight pressed back, standing her ground. "But the Great Devourer has become poisoned by envy and hatred, and it has passed that poison on to you. It has become an evil presence, and it is using you."

"As the Great Spirit uses you," Breathstealer said. "And abandons you when things become too difficult."

"The Spirit has not abandoned me," said Starlight gently. "It has been with me this whole time, and with you too, Breathstealer. I hope one day you can understand that. For now, I see what's coming, reflected in your eyes. And let me say this: It is not too late. You can change your path. Until the moment you draw your final breath, it will never be too late to turn aside from evil."

Breathstealer shook her head, and all Whisper saw in her eyes was an immense, cold sadness. "Good and evil don't exist," she said. "Beneath the surface, Bravelands is a place of horror and brutality. I would rather face that head-on than pretend some Great Spirit is going to help me. All that matters to me now is survival and revenge."

Whisper wanted to back away, but moving away from Starlight would only send her alone into the dark mist. There was a strange buzzing sound, just on the edge of hearing, that suddenly grew much, much louder.

"The Great Devourer sends his regards, Great Mother," said Breathstealer. She bowed and backed away, and Cub slunk miserably with her.

"We have to *go*," Whisper said. "Starlight, we have to get out of here!"

But it was too late. Laughter echoed from the darkness, high-pitched and terrifying. The mist was full of glinting eyes, snapping jaws, and that terrible buzzing sound. The hyenas cackled as they surged toward them, and Starlight let out a snort as one of them landed a bite on her leg. In the blink of an eye it was gone again, evaporating into the night. More came, chattering and shrieking, slipping in and out of existence. Starlight staggered back and forth, trying to keep them at bay, but also seeming, even now, as though she was afraid of accidentally harming them with her huge

bulk. One took a flying leap at Whisper, and she shrieked and tossed her horns at it, knocking it out of the air. It rolled and limped away.

“Whisper, Quake, go!” Starlight called. She swung her trunk back and forth and stomped around in a circle, almost knocking into them. She scattered hyenas as she went, sending them flying, but they weren’t *trying* to hang on—not yet—so they just let themselves be flung away and then ran right back.

There was no question of Whisper running, and she saw Quake make the same choice—he glanced at her, then dived in to headbutt a hyena that was trying to claw underneath Great Mother’s chin. His horns were larger and sharper than hers already, and she hoped that the soft crunch she heard inside the hyena’s chest would keep it down. She turned to do the same as him, stomping and tossing her horns at the hyenas, trying to get between them and the Great Mother, or at least to kick them back again. But she had no concept of how many there were, or whether any of the ones she’d managed to strike would stay away.

Blood was streaming down Starlight’s trunk and legs. Hyenas ran underneath her and snapped at her belly, then vanished again. It was like something out of a nightmare.

Then the hornets came. Whisper saw them swarm around Quake’s face, had just long enough to anticipate the horror of it before they reached her. A thousand buzzing bodies, getting into her eyes, her hair, jabbing at her with their long and vicious stings. She was forced to squeeze her eyes shut to protect them, but she felt the pinprick and then sharp pain as they stung her, all over her face, all over her back. She felt like she was on fire. She heard Quake scream, and then a thudding, stumbling sound, and a deep gasp from Great Mother.

She forced her eyes to open, seeing the scene in front of her in pulsing glimpses. Quake was on his knees, rolling over and over under a cloud of hornets. Starlight was standing, bleeding and pawing at the ground. Hyenas passed Whisper and advanced on Starlight, their laughter discordant in her ears. Starlight’s back leg slipped. She just recovered, but Whisper realized that she *couldn’t* move farther back, because Starlight was casting panicked glances. There must be something there. A drop.

The hornets suddenly fled from Whisper, leaving her reeling and her eyes streaming with pained tears. The horrible truth came clearer, though part of Whisper almost thought she was hallucinating it: Starlight was

standing at the edge of a steep drop into mist and nothing. Just like Echo had. Surrounded by mocking hyenas, just like Echo had been. She would fall—and there was no river there now to cushion her fall and carry her away.

The hyenas stopped advancing. Whisper tried to summon the strength to charge them, but her back was such a throbbing mess that she stumbled, fell, and had to try to get back onto her hooves. . . . Quake was trying to do the same but kept slipping back, twitching on the ground.

There was quiet, but for Starlight's, Quake's, and Whisper's panting breath and the rolling buzzing fury of the hornets.

Starlight looked up, her face blood-streaked.

"You . . . so-called spirit of Death," she croaked. "You don't understand at all. Death doesn't frighten me. I have *lived*. But the Spirit will choose another, and peace *will* come. . . ."

The hornets swarmed her, cutting off her words. Whisper gasped out "No!" and threw herself forward, but it was too late. Great Mother Starlight slipped backward.

She didn't scream. She almost seemed to sigh as she fell into darkness.





## 19

*Echo shifted uncomfortably again, standing as close as he could to the fallen tree without sinking into the swamp. His hooves and his bulk made it harder for him to stay still in the sucking mud than Stride, with his lithe form and soft paws. It wasn't just the physical ground, though. Stride could see that the young buffalo was nervous. He kept scanning the trees, looking back at Stride and then back at the trees.*

The light was dim so far into the Black Branches, and the shadows and the creeping insects shifted all the time. The fallen tree they were waiting beside was a thick black line down into the water, glistening and slick, most of its branches long ago rotted away.

Echo shifted again, turning in a gentle circle to keep himself above the mud.

“We’ll know,” Stride told Echo, making him startle a little. “We’ll know when it’s time, don’t worry.”

“It’s not that,” said Echo. “It’s just—are you sure he’ll be all right? He’s so small!”

“Stonehide?” Stride tried not to laugh at Echo’s earnest, worried face. “Oh yes. Stonehide will be fine.”

“I know he’s tough,” Echo explained. “And I know he’s brave. But is he fast? Is he really fast enough?”

“He doesn’t believe in speed,” said Stride with a small tickle of amusement, despite everything. “He thinks it’s cheating.”

“I don’t want anything to happen to him,” Echo muttered. “He’s putting himself in harm’s way for us.”

“I know. But listen,” said Stride. “If there’s one thing I know about Stonehide, it’s that he *is* the harm. Just wait. You’ll see.”

Echo stared at him and nodded weakly. Stride could see him trying his best to be still, but it didn’t last long, and soon he was fidgeting again.

Then there came a howling and scuffling through the trees, and Echo snapped to attention with a snort. Stride’s ears pricked up, and he put a paw lightly on the fallen tree.

“Get it!” came a distant cackle.

“I’m on it!” came another.

Then Stonehide’s voice: “Come if you dare, mangy rot-eaters!”

Echo took a deep breath, bracing himself, raising a hoof.

“Careful,” Stride warned. “Not too soon.”

“I know,” said Echo.

The sound of pursuit grew closer—hyena laughter, breaking twigs, scurrying paws. There was a burst of movement from the other side of the swamp as swarms of insects scattered, their nests and webs disturbed.

“Never eaten honey badger before!” one of the hyenas screeched.

“I saw it first!” retorted another.

“Well, make your minds up,” huffed Stonehide. “There’s not enough for everyone!”

Stride stifled a snort.

At last the undergrowth shivered and shook, and they saw brown-and-black pelts, and then the bushes parted and Stonehide scampered out onto

the far bank of the swamp. Stride waved his tail, and Echo took another deep breath. Stonehide saw them, took a run-up, and jumped into the swamp. Just in time—hyena jaws snapped in the air where his tail had been.

Stonehide's paws found the end of the fallen tree, and he scrambled up out of the water and along the trunk, nimbly keeping his balance as he sprinted toward his friends.

More hyenas burst from the bushes. Some of them jumped straight after Stonehide. One of them hesitated, saying, "What . . . ?" as he spotted Stride and Echo on the other side, but then the hyena behind him ran straight into him and they both fell face-first into the horrible muddy water. Unlike Stonehide's surprising agility, the hyenas who made it to the tree trunk seemed to be all knees and shoulders, and the slippery, rotting surface was too much for them, tipping them off and into the swamp with a series of satisfying *plop* sounds and sludgy splashing.

Stonehide flew off the end of the trunk, and Stride looked at Echo.

"Now!"

Echo put his horns down against the side of the tree and heaved. It wobbled, partly crumbled, and then slid away into the swamp and sank, taking the last hyena who'd managed to maintain her balance with it. She cursed and spat at them as she was forced to swim through the gloopy water back to the bank.

"All right, go!" Stride said, and the three companions turned and crashed through the trees, leaving the sound of flailing and splashing and angry hyena cries behind them.

"How many did you get?" Echo gasped, shoving his way through a bush. "I counted at least eight!"

"Got 'em all chasing me," Stonehide panted. "Not sure they all got as far as the water . . ."

Sure enough, Stride and Stonehide finally burst out into the vivid green clearing, and they found one hyena male standing in front of the tunnel, his eyes narrowing at them in anger.

"I knew it," he snarled. "I'm not moving, you little menace. I have my orders. Get out of here or feel my teeth in your scrawny neck!"

With a crunching of branches, Echo emerged behind them.

"Who are you calling *scrawny*?" he snorted, stamping his hooves in the soft grass, kicking out large clumps of earth.

Stride recognized the look on the hyena's face. It was the look of a predator, a killer, who'd suddenly come face-to-face with a grass-eater who could and would stomp them into the ground. Echo was a calf, but still more than a match for a lone hyena. And the look in his eyes was familiar too, the hysterical glint of a grass-eater backed into a corner.

"I can't leave my position," the hyena said valiantly.

"Doesn't look to me like you've got a lot of choice," Stonehide remarked, sauntering out of Echo's path. "My big friend here will go past you or *through* you."

Echo obligingly scraped a hoof in the earth again, and the hyena let out an angry yelp, turned tail, and fled, yipping over his shoulder as he went.

The three of them turned and grinned at one another, enjoying their victory for a moment. But it couldn't last too long. The hyenas would be clambering out of the swamp.

One by one, their gazes were drawn toward the tunnel. Stride shivered.

"Are you sure I'll fit?" Echo asked in a small voice.

"You're not that big, mate," said Stonehide.

"I think . . ." Stride hesitated. "I'm not sure it matters how physically big you are. I'm not sure it's a . . . *real* tunnel, past a certain point. I think once you're in, it sort of . . . pulls you down."

"Oh, *wonderful*," said Stonehide, wrinkling his muzzle in disgust.

An awkward pause followed, until Stride broke it.

"I'll go first," he said through gritted teeth. It was the only reasonable way. He'd been in before, and they couldn't send Echo face-first into likely terrible danger.

He put one paw in through the entrance, then another. Taking a deep breath as if he was plunging into deep water, he pushed his head and shoulders inside.

Echo came next, and despite Stride's suspicions about the tunnel, he could hear the buffalo struggling to squeeze through. Yet soon Stride was feeling the squeezing sensation, the slickness beneath his paws, and he glanced back to check on Echo. He could see nothing but the top of the calf's head, but he did seem to be making progress.

"It'll be over in a minute," he said. "Just keep moving."

"What . . . what *is* that?" Echo squeaked. "I feel it, just like you said!"

"Oh, Spirit," came Stonehide's voice from behind. "That's horrible. Oh no. Nope."

His friend's reaction was almost funny enough that it took the edge off the disgusting squeezing feeling. And at last, just as before, it released him into the same blank earth tunnels, with the chill dead air and the gray light that shouldn't have been there.

There were more insects here this time, and Stride stepped aside as a massive centipede crawled past him. But they didn't seem to be *after* him, like the flying beetles had been before, and they didn't call out to him in Flicker's voice. They were just there, busily scurrying about as if on some very important work that only insects could understand.

"Look out for the bugs," he said to the others as they emerged, panting and shuddering, into the gray tunnel.

"I wish I could've brought the oxpeckers," said Echo.

"Ooh," said Stonehide a moment later. "Yum!"

There was a crunching sound, and Stride turned to see his friend with the back half of the centipede dangling from his jaws.

"What?" Stonehide said. "They're delicious."

"And it tastes . . . normal, does it?" Stride asked cautiously.

Stonehide chewed thoughtfully. "Close enough."

With a shudder, Stride looked away.

He'd been right—he was sure that these same tunnels had felt smaller before when it had been just him, without the little buffalo. Echo was standing now, the top of his head almost but not quite brushing the roof of the tunnel. It gave him absolutely no joy to realize that he was right.

"I've always wondered what it'd be like to live in a burrow," Echo said faintly. "How—how far does it go?"

"No idea," said Stride. "I didn't get far."

"And where the tunnel splits off . . ."

Stride shook his head. "Sorry. Let's just stick to the middle for now. Follow our noses. See where we end up."

They walked, Stride in the lead, Stonehide bringing up the rear. They moved in silence for a little while, but the quiet was unnerving, broken only by the shuffling of Stonehide's claws and the sound of Echo's labored breathing.

"It's so cold," Echo said at last. "I suppose . . . it would be, but . . ."

"It doesn't feel good, does it?" Stride said.

"Feels . . . *lonely* to me," said Stonehide.

"Yes," Echo whispered.

It would have been easy to lose all track of time, moving vaguely downward, passing, sniffing, and disregarding every turning. But at last, something began to change. The texture of the ground started to shift from soft earth to harder, smoother rock. There were fewer insects, with fewer places to burrow. And the shape of the walls, rather than turning to smooth stone, began to look crystalline and faceted. They passed a seam of vivid purple crystal in the rock, the color of bruising flesh. It was the first true color they'd found in however long they'd been down here, and Stride wished he was happier to see it.

The farther they went, the more the crystal seams jutted from the rock, so that sometimes Echo had to squeeze through, his horns catching on the jagged shards. They were sickly green, blood-red, fleshy pink. And they seemed to glow, though whether they were shedding light somehow, or it was just that they were so brightly colored against the dull gray of the stone walls, Stride couldn't tell.

He saw the first claw marks when he paused to wait for Echo to gingerly move around a patch of sharp-looking, wasp-yellow crystal. But they couldn't be claw marks. They had to be just more strange rock shapes. There was nothing to do but just keep going, so that was what they did, down and down, and farther down.

Suddenly Stride stopped. A burst of moving air had hit him in the face—warmer than the air had been before, and almost gentle. It stopped, and then it came again.

"Is something there?" Echo gasped.

Stride peered into the tunnel ahead. "Not that I can see," he whispered.

"Only, doesn't it feel like . . . like something breathing?" Echo said.

"I really wish you hadn't said that," Stonehide muttered.

They pressed on, trying not to think about it, until at last Stride realized that the tunnel was coming to an end at an open, black mouth.

He signaled with his tail for the others to tread carefully and slunk toward the end of the tunnel. Beyond, there was a much larger, darker space. The top of it was lost in inky darkness, but when he breathed in the space he could feel that it was cavernous.

Echo came up to stand beside him and Stonehide too, each of them gazing into the darkness.

Stride was about to open his mouth to say that they should carry on cautiously and see what was out in the dark—but before he could, Echo let

out a gasp and a cry that reverberated around them.

“*Mother?*” He broke into a trot and ran to the right, his hooves clattering on the stone.

“Echo, be careful!” Stride called after him. Then he saw what Echo had seen—a small, fluttering cloud of moths. Their brown-and-gray bodies were unnaturally bright in the darkness, as if they were being lit by a shaft of sunshine that didn’t touch the ground around them. “Echo, no!” Stride gasped. “Stop!”

“It’s my mother! I hear her voice!” Echo said. “Wait, Mother, please—come back!”

The moths swarmed away, and Echo started after them.

“Stop him!” Stonehide yelped.

Stride broke into a run, his paws rebelling at the idea of charging into the dark, but knowing that he had to, or Echo would vanish after the moths and they might never find him again. He skidded around the buffalo calf and put his body between him and the moths.

“Stop! It’s a trick, it’s not her!” Stride said, and then he yelped as he felt one of his paws tread on empty air. He scrambled away from the edge toward Echo, who had just managed to stop too. The moths flew on, dancing and shining, over a deep black chasm.

Echo stared after them for a moment, then he looked at Stride. His eyes glistened with tears.

“It was her voice,” he said. “You must have heard it. She told me to follow. . . .”

“It’s all right,” Stride said, trying to be reassuring, though he was still shaking. “It’s a trick the Great Devourer likes to play. It got me too, last time. Just . . . let’s get farther away from the edge, please?”

They backed off to where Stonehide was pacing back and forth, with anger and worry making his tail puff up and swish back and forth.

“Can we just agree,” he said, in a voice pitched high with tension, “not to chase any bugs at all while we’re in here? If they’re really our people, they can wait for us to walk. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” said Stride. He looked around the cavern and back at the tunnel they’d come from. “I think we need to retrace our steps. Find another way.”

“And keep alert,” said Stonehide. “The Great Devourer clearly isn’t keen on visitors.”







*Whisper winced as Grass ran a gentle hand over her hornet stings, covering the worst ones with mud from the watering hole.*

*“This will have to do,” he muttered. “I’m no Goodleaf, I’m afraid.”*

*“Thank you,” Whisper murmured back.*

*“I’d rather have something to do,” Grass said, his face creasing.*

*Another bellowing trumpet split the air and shook the trees around the clearing. The elephants were in mourning, and they did not do it quietly. It sounded cathartic, to cry out their grief to the sky like this. Whisper wished she had the words, or the sound under her breast, that would alleviate the wretchedness and despair.*

But the noise of the elephants was making the other creatures nervous.

The vultures were in disarray, taking flight, landing, calling out raucously, startling the other animals who'd gathered to pay their respects. The clearing was crowded again, as much as when Starlight had been struggling to give advice. The smoldering distrust and anger had mostly gone, replaced with mourning and with an edge of panic. Bravelands had been on the edge of ruin, and Great Mother Starlight had bought them a sliver of extra time with her deal with Holler—but the Devourer was rising, and the watering hole was drying up.

And Echo was still gone.

The Great Mother's final expression flashed before Whisper's eyes again. The quirk of her mouth between her bloodied tusks.

*The Spirit will choose another, and peace will come. . . .*

Great Mother Starlight had seemed so certain. Had she known something Whisper did not? Or had she just been so tired of the fight that the idea of handing it over to someone else was not frightening in that moment?

Whisper hated the thought, but it gnawed at her.

What if the Great Mother had simply chosen to die rather than stay and see Bravelands destroyed? What if she'd given up on them?

"Someone needs to speak to them," said Grass, looking over at the milling animals. "But I don't know what to say. . . ."

"I—I'll give it a go," Whisper said. "I'll try to think of something comforting."

"You don't need to do that," Grass told her firmly. "You have done enough. You were with her at the end."

Whisper nodded. "No, I suppose I don't need to. But I will anyway."

She got up, still feeling the tight itch of the hornet stings across her back. She went to the large rock that had loomed behind Starlight as she gave her advice and stood in front of it, feeling very small.

She cleared her throat.

"Everybody, listen for a moment," she said.

At first, nobody took much notice. But a baboon close by did, and he elbowed and shushed his companions, and soon a wave of slow-moving, sniffing silence drifted out from Whisper, leaving her standing, uncertain, trying to decide what to say.

“I know everyone is worried,” she said at last. “I am too. I don’t know what we’re going to do next. But the Great Spirit is out there, looking for its next Great Parent, even now. The Spirit has always chosen wisely, and I know it will do so again. We need a leader, but Great Mother Starlight knew that we were strong enough to weather this.”

A few of the creatures looked at one another skeptically.

*Clumsy of me. I’m certain many of these animals have had family who’ve died in the last days—they didn’t weather it, nor did Starlight herself, come to that.*

She took a deep breath and tried again.

“We can’t wait around for the new Great Parent, we should all be—be vigilant and resourceful in these terrible times,” she said. She hid her wince as the words came out of her mouth.

*That’s not much better. What more could they be doing?*

“Please,” she said with a flash of inspiration, “listen to the birds. Listen to the lizards and the snakes. The Spirit could have chosen *you*, or your families. Any one of you could be the next Great Parent, and the signs of the Great Spirit might be all around us already.”

The mood of the crowd seemed to lift a little. A few animals immediately turned and went to the vultures, trying to strike up conversations. Whisper allowed herself a tiny smile. Imagine if some meerkat or elderly wild dog found out, right now, that they were the next Great Parent? She watched for a while just in case, but all she saw were disappointed shrugs and shaking heads.

*But now, at least, they’re sort of united, she told herself. They’re all having the same experience—the same one they’ve always had, feeling thirsty and not being able to talk to vultures, but together!*

It had to count for something.

She was about to step away from the rock, to go and find Quake and lie down somewhere and try not to think about her stings, when she heard hoofbeats. An elephant trumpeted in annoyance, and Quake appeared at her side, his good eye darting and worried. His other one was still swollen shut from hornet stings.

“It’s Father,” he said. “We should hide.”

For a moment Whisper panicked, casting around for somewhere to slip away to—but there was no point now, was there? Echo was gone, far beyond Holler’s reach, and if he was planning to hurt *her*, right here and

now, surrounded by friends and witnesses . . . she almost thought she'd like to see him try.

"I'm staying," she told Quake.

"Really?" Quake cast one more worried look over his shoulder. "Well, then . . . I'll stay too."

Holler strode into the clearing without looking where he was treading, smaller creatures scuttling out of his way and out of the way of the large group of posturing buffalo who'd come with him.

"Creatures of Bravelands," Holler announced in a strident voice that echoed around the clearing, shattering the mournful peace. "News travels fast, and I am desperately sorry for your loss—for my loss, too. Great Mother Starlight was a good friend."

Whisper swallowed her disgust.

Holler didn't even seem to have noticed her yet. He went on, clearly loving every moment that all the attention was focused on him—and not too worried whether they were listening out of interest or out of fear.

"I am ready to do my duty," he said. "I am ready to lead."

"Lead?" asked Grass, bravely making his way to stand in front of Holler. "What do you mean?"

"I was Deputy Great Parent to Great Mother Starlight," said Holler, and Whisper's heart sank.

*Of course. Of course that was what he got her to agree to. . . .*

Her hide prickled, and her stings flared. Was he behind her death? Had this been his plan all along? She knew that the buffalo and the hyenas had made an alliance in the past.

But Breathstealer was with the Great Devourer, and Holler didn't even believe in the Spirit; she doubted he would throw in his lot with them.

"Starlight—poor Starlight—would expect me to step up in Bravelands' hour of need," Holler said. "You may call me Great Father Holler for now."

"I'll call you a murderer," Whisper blurted out. Holler looked up, spotted her and Quake, and his eyes flashed. She couldn't quite read whether he was furious, amused, or just recognizing his old enemy once again. "This buffalo took the leadership of the herd by force," she announced as loudly as she could. "He killed his own brother!"

"Misunderstandings," Holler said, shaking his head in exaggerated sadness. "Terrible accidents. I challenged Bellow for the leadership in the

traditional manner. His injuries killed him, and I mourn his spirit every day.”

He walked up to them, and as if they were not even there, he settled down in front of the towering rock. Whisper and Quake had to dodge out of the way to stop him crushing them.

“You can’t do this,” said Whisper, but Holler turned a supercilious smile on her and said, “I am terribly sorry for your loss—of Starlight, and of our dear Echo.” Whisper’s stomach turned. What did he know? What had he done? “You both look tired, why don’t you sit, rest, I will deal with everything from now on.”

He rubbed his flank against the rock, and Grass bristled at the obvious disrespect.

Whisper wanted to scream. She had been standing up to Holler for so long. She’d been shouting his crimes at the top of her voice—and for what? Nobody ever listened.

She watched in a kind of detached horror as the animals in the clearing muttered among themselves, milled around, uncertain what to do. Most of them simply began to leave. They knew this was wrong. But they wouldn’t fight him. Once a buffalo like Holler took his seat, only an elephant could dislodge him, and the elephants were in no state to start a fight right now. Whisper felt dizzy at how fast this had happened, how little resistance he had met. Grass clutched his hands tight together in front of his chest and stared up at Holler anxiously.

“I—you can’t just do this,” he said.

“Grass,” said Holler, completely ignoring his words. “There you are. I won’t be taking any petitioners today. Please escort the stragglers out of here—Rushing, Stomp, help him, please.”

Two buffalo turned and began to nudge away the animals who had stayed behind.

“But Great Father,” called out a gazelle, before Stomp snorted into her face, startling her and sending her prancing backward.

“I cannot see you today. We must all take tonight to mourn Great Mother Starlight properly,” said Holler smoothly. “Tomorrow I will bring some order to this place.”

“What do you mean?” Grass whimpered.

Holler sniffed around his sitting place, found a stray strand of brown grass, and pulled it up with his teeth, swallowing it in a few bites. He

chewed in thoughtful silence for a moment longer, until the only creatures left in the Great Parent's clearing were him, his buffalo, Grass, and Whisper and Quake.

Whisper realized too late that they should have run. Those friends, those witnesses who had given her such courage just a moment ago, were all gone now. She tried to back away, nudging Quake to do the same.

"Starlight was so . . . *unfocused*," Holler said. "Always trying to please everybody and never managing to please anybody. Always preaching peace, when peace has never solved a problem in all the long history of Bravelands." He shook himself and yawned. "You, baboon, I need food. Go and get some."

"I—I don't—" Grass stuttered.

"There is still food in the forest," Holler said. "I've seen your kind hoarding it. No more. From now on, all the food near here will be brought to me first to be distributed fairly—to each, according to his contribution to Bravelands."

*And who contributes more than the Great Father?*

Whisper shook her head and took another few steps back—until her tail hit something large, hairy, and solid. She turned to see Rushing standing behind her with another large male, blocking her exit.

"Quake," said Holler. "My son. It is time for you to go. You are no longer part of the herd—and this forest is now herd territory. Leave while you can and walk the lonely path you've chosen for yourself."

Quake glanced at Whisper. "Come on," he murmured with a jerk of his head. Whisper stepped up to follow him.

"Not you, Whisper."

Rushing put his horns down and shoved her in the side—not hard enough to pierce or even really bruise, but hard enough that she was forced in front of Holler, stumbling to her knees.

Holler got up, towering over her.

"Leave her alone!" Quake cried. His father ignored him.

"Where is Echo?" Holler asked.

Whisper stared at him. Despite it all, hope flared in her heart for a second.

*He doesn't know. So he didn't catch him. Echo could be alive . . . and Holler has no idea where he is. . . .*

She took a shaky breath. "I don't know," she said.

“Now, that’s not true, is it?” said Holler. “You know, animals talk at the watering hole. I hear your brother has gone on a little *quest*. And you know where.”

“I want to find my brother as much as you do,” Whisper said, “but I can’t help you.”

Holler gave a long-suffering sigh. “I’ll give you one more chance,” he said. “Think carefully before you throw it away. Think about what happens when I have no further use for you. Now where . . . is . . . *Echo*?”

He leaned in close, hissing the words into her face in a burst of hot breath.

Whisper said nothing. What was the point?

Holler let out a roar, flecking her face with spittle, and stomped the ground by her head with his hooves, making the ground shake.

“No!” Quake yelled and started toward them, but Stomp was ready for him and shoved him to the ground before he could move, knocking the breath out of him.

Whisper stared at nothing, waiting for the end.



## 21

*Breathstealer came to slowly, gradually becoming aware of the ache of a wound in her side, the painful rasp of her breath in her throat, the way the blood congealed on her muzzle and under her claws. She was gasping. There was a sickly dizziness in her.*

She tasted blood. Not hers.

And then, as her heartbeat slowed, she remembered where they were. The shredded corpse at her paws was a skinny male lion with a patchy orange mane. Sly. And all around her, Slypride lay scattered, dying or dead.

For a moment, as she came back to herself, she felt a wave of sorrow seize her heart. There was no difference, no difference at all, between this



and the scene at the baobab. The cycle of slaughter would go on forever, and it was . . . it was . . .

The grief faded, and a moment later she couldn't remember how it had felt.

The slaughter would go on, and it was . . . perfect.

"Breathstealer," said a voice. She turned and saw her hyenas, her sisters, arrayed among the dead lions with looks of awe and triumph on their faces. Spinesnapper's eyes were wide, and she knelt in front of Breathstealer, baring her neck once more.

"I had no idea," she said. "I was wrong about you, Breathstealer. You are not simply Nosebiter's sister. You—you are the greatest hyena who has ever laid paws on the savannah. Future clans will sing songs to the moon about the Age of Breathstealer."

Breathstealer swallowed. It was strange to be praised for something she didn't remember doing. She felt strangely detached, as if she was floating above the world slightly—but she could also feel in her aching bones and filthy fur how hard she must have fought.

Spinesnapper was obviously frightened as well as impressed. There was no other excuse for such effusive praise.

*See what we can do,* came the Great Devourer's voice. There were no swarming insects other than the flies who had descended to feast on the corpses of Slypride, and they were behaving normally. The Devourer was with her now, no need for messengers. The Devourer was *inside* her.

*See how powerful we are. All will fear us. They will dread our coming, bow down, and beg for their lives. In your bloody footsteps, spirits will scream and writhe, and there will be no mercy for them.*

Its words washed over her, and she felt nothing but happy exhaustion. The others were celebrating, darting in and out to bite the corpses of the lions, mocking their victims, naming the lost hyenas who'd brought this upon Slypride. Breathstealer looked at them and saw only their deaths—disease, starvation, war.

Her gaze traveled over the scene and snagged on something that was odd, out of place. At the edge of this chaos of blood and dead lions, a living lion sat, watching with shivering paws and haunted eyes.

Cub.

Breathstealer's paws didn't want to move at first—stiff from her exertions, she guessed—but with an effort she managed to walk over to

him. He looked up at her, and she saw fear in his eyes too, though he didn't roll over in front of her or run away.

She felt a jagged pain in her heart, as if one of the lions had clawed her from the inside out, and for a moment that strange grief flooded back to her.

"It had to be done," she said.

"I know," said Cub. "There's not a lion here I'll mourn, believe me. It's just . . . it was so . . . Breathstealer, are *you* all right?"

Her breath hitched for a moment. She felt pain and panic, just for a moment, as if she was glimpsing it through a thick curtain of fog. She wanted to ask Cub just what he'd seen her do, what the Devourer had done through her, but the feeling slipped away again.

"We're fine," she said. "We feel stronger than ever."

*Because we are one now.*

She felt the truth of it, the voice thrumming down her spine to the tip of her tail. There was no Breathstealer without the Great Devourer now.

"We cannot rest," she heard herself say. The words weren't quite hers, or maybe the thoughts weren't. "There are infiltrators, invaders. They are standing at the mouth of the underworld. They must be stopped."

"What?" Cub asked.

Breathstealer blinked. "I . . ." She cleared her throat, her jaw coming back under her own control again. "The Great Devourer knows." She turned to the others, summoned them over with a bark and a toss of her head. The hyenas scrambled to respond, falling into line around her, staring. Even the few who had sided with Hidetearer and yet still lived were looking at her now as if she had stepped out of a far-fetched legend.

"There are creatures in the world below, the underworld of spirits ruled by the Devourer," she told them flatly. "They are trying to undermine it, undo its great work. We must go to the Devourer's aid right now, or all our efforts will have been in vain. Follow me."

She turned, sniffing the air. She thought that the quickest way to Black Branches was down this ravine and then across an open plain. . . .

But when she tried to move her feet, she almost stumbled as they didn't go quite where she'd meant them to.

*The Great Devourer?* she wondered. She wobbled, then recovered, as an invisible force steered her aside. The other hyenas muttered to one another but fell in behind her—Cub, too, lingered by her side in a way that she was sure she *should* have found annoying or strange. In fact, having him there

was strangely steadying, even as the Devourer steered her toward one of the wide black cracks in the earth.

Fumes were escaping from the fissure, forming a shifting heat haze in the bright sunlight. They smelled of rot and of something else, sweet and strong, but dizzying as soon as she took a breath.

The crack led across the plain, opening wider, until finally Breathstealer saw the place where they could squeeze in. The earth dropped away into the dark, and to reach it, jaggedly stepped rocks led down.

"In there?" Spinesnapper said faintly.

"That's right," said Breathstealer.

Spinesnapper took half a step forward and hesitated, holding her paw above the first step. She looked back at Breathstealer.

"Your blood in mine now," Breathstealer reminded her. "*Get in.*"

The hyenas needed no more encouragement. One by one they slipped down into the gap, and Breathstealer stood and watched. Her throat felt raw, as if the Devourer's voice was too large, too jagged to be spoken by a flesh-and-blood creature. . . .

She cast a glance at Cub, who shook his head, stepping back.

"No," he said. "I'm—I'm scared, I can't. I'll be no use to you there anyway, will I?"

Breathstealer hesitated, waiting. But the Great Devourer was silent on the subject, so she nodded at Cub.

"Then go," she said. "Run and find your own path from here on." Her eyes watered, and she blinked the moisture away. "Run and find somewhere to hide. The Great Devourer's world is nearly born, and it will be . . . magnificent."

Cub fixed her with a terrified stare again and then turned tail and fled across the plains.

Breathstealer squeezed into the tunnel after the others. She had never done this before, had never experienced anything like this slippery squeezing sensation, but she wasn't afraid, or even surprised. They emerged into a wide tunnel, glowing up ahead with the reflected light of sickly colored crystal, and while the other hyenas reeled and looked around in awe and shock, Breathstealer took a deep breath of the chill, dead air.

She knew this place. She knew just where the tunnels connected, underneath Bravelands, and the places where the layers of earth above their heads were thinnest.

This was her place, her kingdom.  
*This is our home.*



*Holler didn't kill her. Whisper was genuinely surprised.*

At last he had given up with the threats and stomping, perplexed and furious, and had her taken away—half dragged, half shoved—into the trees. She wondered if he had given Stomp orders to end it, but no—he simply shouldered her into a bush and stood guard. She tried to get up, and he let her, but the moment she tensed to take a tentative step away from him, he turned with a furious stamping of his hooves, and she flinched and sank back onto her belly.

There was no escape. All she could do was wait—either for Holler to decide he was ready to have her killed after all, or for Echo to return in

triumph with the secrets of the Way and the liberated spirits of Bravelands behind him.

It was a relief when there was a small scuffling in the undergrowth, and Grass appeared, with a small wave to Stomp.

"I'd like to check on my friend," Grass asked the huge buffalo. "Holler said I could see how she's doing."

Stomp gave a snort and a shrug, and Grass edged around him to Whisper's side. He put a gentle, leathery hand on her muzzle, being careful of the hornet stings.

"The vultures have flown," Grass said quietly, with a cautious glance up at Stomp.

"I'm sure they have things to do." Whisper nodded.

Go, she thought. *Find the true Great Parent, help us evict this squatter from the forest!*

"I miss Starlight," Grass went on. "So much. She had been struggling with this hot season, I will admit—but you should have seen her when she was younger. Full of energy, full of ideas. I first met her when I was a baby, you know. I remember thinking that she was so gentle, but she could stand up to lions and cheetahs and even the buffalo. . . ." He broke off with another look at Stomp. Whisper suspected he thought he'd gone too far, talking about standing up to buffalo, but Stomp wasn't listening.

"Do you want to know one of the last things she said to me?" Whisper said.

"Go on," said Grass.

"She told me to play." Grief creased Whisper's expression, and she had to take a breath, but she pressed on. "She told Quake and me that we should never forget to play in puddles. That we'd never be too old."

"That sounds like the Starlight I knew," said Grass quietly.

"Stomp!" Holler's voice shook the trees. "Bring her!"

Whisper got to her hooves quickly. "I'm going," she said. "I'm going."

"I'll come with you," Grass said.

They reentered the clearing, and Whisper stumbled to a halt when she saw what was waiting for them. Holler, pacing back and forth with a smug grin on his face, and Quake, lying in the center of the clearing, panting and shaking. Blood was oozing from one nostril, and one of his forelegs looked like it was swelling up, maybe broken.

“Whisper!” Holler greeted her with a glee that made him sound jolly and avuncular, despite his own son’s distressed form crouching right next to him. “Why didn’t you tell me Echo is paying a visit to my dead brother? I would have sent my good wishes with him!”

Whisper stared at him and then at Quake. She tried not to glare as Quake looked up gingerly and met her eyes, then winced and looked away again. She probably shouldn’t blame him for not wanting to die to protect Echo’s secret—but she did a little.

“Yes, poor Quake,” Holler said, still cheerful. “He just *couldn’t* keep it to himself—not when *your* life was on the line, Whisper. Young love! How touching.”

Whisper’s breath caught. After everything, he had done this for *her*? She was moved—and dismayed.

“Never would have thought it,” Holler sneered. “After he tried to kill you that time, but the heart will do as it will, I suppose.”

Quake couldn’t seem to meet Whisper’s eyes. Whisper couldn’t quite look away.

Holler laughed. “I knew that old elephant was going senile, but I never thought she’d send Echo off to his death,” he said. “Hunting myths! Ridiculous. I’ve seen enough to know that when you die, you’re dead. Rot-meat and nothing more. We’ll never see him again, though if he does limp back from that place, we’ll be waiting to welcome him home, won’t we?”

Whisper moved over to Quake, and Holler didn’t bother to stop her. She put her shoulder under Quake’s trembling flank and helped him up to his hooves.

“Whisper,” he breathed. “I’m sorry. . . .”

“It’s not your fault,” she told him.

“I just couldn’t . . . he was going to . . .”

“He still is.” Whisper sighed. She shot a furious glare at Holler. “He’s going to kill us both. At least I assume so. Now he has no further use for us.”

“But . . .” Quake looked at his father. There was still hope in his eyes, and Whisper felt a punch of sympathy, churned up with exasperation, at her former enemy’s naivety.

Holler snorted. “Look at you two. So sweet! I’m almost tempted to let you return to the herd, you would certainly make some strong calves. But

I'm afraid she's right, Quake. There is only one more thing I need you for, son."

They were shoved apart as Holler's buffalo cronies crowded around and between them.

"What are you doing?" Grass squeaked.

"Setting an example," Holler said. "To any other creature who might decide to try to cross me. You two, to the watering hole. *March.*"

The walk to the watering hole from the forest was not long—they had sprinted it in a fever of worry only the day before. But now it felt like it stretched out forever. More than once, Whisper had seen Quake's knee buckle and thought that he wouldn't even make it far enough to meet whatever fate Holler had in mind, that he would be left behind to feed the hyenas, or even put out of his misery where they stood. But he always got up again, and Holler seemed determined that he would make it to what he was calling the Great Gathering, though Whisper knew it would be no kind of Great Gathering worth the name.

There were plenty of other creatures there, stalking the almost-vanished puddle at the center of the muddy depression where there had once been a deep, life-giving pool. Buffalo stood around the watering hole, some guarding the few faintly green reeds from the starving grass-eaters who surrounded them, and some guarding the grass-eaters from predators who stalked the edges of the group. The pod of crocodiles was lying, dried-out and unhappy-looking, in the mud of the watering hole.

At the sight of Holler approaching, an excited, nervous chatter started up around them. Several voices cried out, calling him Great Father, asking for advice or for access to the water.

"Great Father, please," begged an antelope with a broken horn, "can't you bring the rains back? I thought that . . ." She stopped, and Whisper saw her notice Quake's injuries and Whisper's mutinous stare.

"What did those two do?" muttered a monkey voice from nearby.

"What do you mean?" retorted another, "they're calves—what could they possibly have *done* to earn such punishment?"

She wanted to turn and look for her supporter, to tell them without words that she was grateful *someone* could see the horror of this—but she didn't want to draw attention to them. Rushing had looked around, snorting, and failed to find the source of the comment.



“Silence!” Holler thundered, climbing up onto a rock at the edge of what had once been the water. “Harken to your new leader. I have been meditating on my duty as your Great Parent. I have concluded that Bravelands relies on *order*. You all look to me to provide it. We all follow the Code—only kill to survive—and I help you understand what *survival* really means. I owe you my wisdom, and in return you owe your obedience. This is how it has always been.”

Whisper hissed through her gritted teeth.

*What nonsense is he spouting? It's not about obedience, it never has been. . . .*

“If I can't provide an orderly existence, strong leadership—*survival*, in the most urgent sense—what use am I as a Great Father?”

A few male buffalo nodded enthusiastically and started a cheer. It didn't go far, but it was loud enough that it startled a few other animals into nodding and muttering in approval.

*Cowards? Fools? Whisper wondered. Or are they just so desperate for someone to do something that they'll nod along to anyone who sounds confident and makes big promises?*

“These two were once members of my herd. They are both very dear to me,” Holler said. “But they have broken the peace and order of Bravelands. They threaten our *survival*, and so, with a heavy heart, I tell you that they must pay the price.” Holler gave a huge, theatrical sigh. “I know I have a lot to prove to all of you, so let me show my dedication to Bravelands, and to the role of Great Father, by beginning with Quake—my own son.”

Gasps went up from the crowd as Quake was shoved forward to the edge of the muddy watering hole. Holler raised his voice in a loud, wordless bellow . . .

. . . and the crocodiles in the watery center of the lake looked up, their long jaws opening, and began to crawl their way toward Quake.

“No!” Whisper gasped. “Don't do this. He can't do this!”

Quake tried to back away, but the solid wall of buffalo flesh at his back stopped him. Whisper couldn't help but remember the Shell. But this was like some horrible version.

“Holler, stop!” Whisper yelled. “This isn't right! You beat him, and he told you where Echo was, now let him go!”

Rushing lowered his horns and gave her a hard shove, not quite enough to pierce skin, but Whisper yelped and fell to her knees.

“Shush,” said Holler. “Or you’ll be next.”

“You think I care?” Whisper said, struggling to her hooves again.

*Facing up to him hasn’t helped yet, she thought, but staying quiet was worse. This is my chance to give him the horns one last time, and this time I won’t waste it.*

“You are a Codebreaker!” she declared, tossing her head—though her neck and shoulders seized with pain—and stomping one hoof on the dry ground, hoping against hope that *some* of the assembled animals would listen and see through him. “You may not believe in the Great Spirit, you may think all these creatures’ faith is worthless, but you cannot change the true meaning of things. You are not Great Father, and this is not survival—this is tyranny!”

“This is *order*!” Holler cried. “I’ve heard enough. It seems you too are determined to undermine Bravelands. Rushing, throw her in with him!”

“Wait . . . ,” said a voice from the crowd, a zebra. “This is brutal, and she’s just a calf. . . .”

“Quiet!” Holler screamed. “Or join her!”

The ripple of dissent pleased Whisper in a cold and hopeless way, even as Rushing shoved her forward and she slid down the muddy bank of the watering hole, into the shallow water that remained at the bottom. Quake was haunch-deep now, the crocodiles swarming toward him. Whisper wanted to squeeze her eyes shut. She had seen this before; all buffalo had. It was the price of river crossings that fate would choose an unlucky victim so that the herd could make their way. But this was so much worse. Predetermined. He couldn’t even run. She saw the buffalo on the bank avert their eyes, miserable and downtrodden.

“Hey, Whisper,” Quake gasped. He was shaking all over as crocodiles waddled and swam toward him, their long bodies writhing as they came. “Thank you.”

“What *for*?” Whisper gulped.

“I don’t know, everything,” Quake said.

He squeezed his eyes shut. The crocodiles picked up speed.

Out of options, out of time, and against all her bodily instincts, Whisper ran to his side. They would face death together and let all of Bravelands see it.

The crocodiles were almost on them, frothing the mud, getting in one another’s way in their haste to take the first bite. Whisper wondered how it

would feel, their teeth sinking into her muscles, cracking her bones, tearing her flesh. It wouldn't be quick, she knew that much. And despite her efforts to calm her breathing, fear crawled through her guts. How could Holler have won? *How* could the Great Spirit let this happen. It was so, so . . . *wrong*.

"No," she mumbled to herself. "No, no, no . . ."

"I love you," said Quake. "I'm sorry."

A sudden rage possessed her. She wouldn't face death with her eyes closed, trembling. Strength stiffened her limbs, and she advanced on the marauding reptiles, opening her mouth in a defiant shriek that tore up from the depths of her chest: "Stop!"

The crocodiles, to her astonishment, stopped, sending a wave of mud lapping against Whisper's legs.

A deathly hush fell over the watering hole, leaving Holler chuckling to himself, but only for a moment.

"Back! Get back!" Whisper said.

The crocodiles hesitated, staring at her, and then exchanging glances with one another. Presumably, Willow thought, trying to figure out what this crazed buffalo calf was saying to them and whether they could still eat it.

"What the . . .," Quake stammered. "They . . . they stopped. . . ."

In the quiet, a small voice spoke up. Grass, the baboon, said in a clear and awestruck voice, "She spoke to the crocodiles."

The words were repeated, taken up by other creatures, passed along to those who couldn't see through the crowd.

"No," Holler sneered. "It's a trick, some kind of . . ."

Whisper spun to face him and took a deep breath.

"It is no trick, Holler," she said and started, with as much dignity as she could muster, to climb slowly out of the muddy watering hole. She heard Quake following her and risked a look. The crocodiles had not advanced farther. Some were even sinking away, backing off. "The Great Spirit has intervened to stop this flagrant Codebreaking! All of Bravelands is disgusted at your actions. They will not stand for it, Holler."

She got up onto dry land again and turned to address the crowd—finding Grass, the zebra who had spoken, the monkey troop, each in turn with her gaze as she spoke.

“This buffalo is no Great Father!” she called out. “He held your lives to ransom to force Great Mother to make him deputy—and when he’s killed us, he will turn on each of you one by one, until it’s too late to stop him. His ego is as big as his horns, and it’s only by lies and by force that he’s even leader of the buffalo!”

“Shut up!” Holler howled, rearing up on his back legs and kicking at the air near Whisper’s head. She had been ready, and she dropped onto her belly on the ground and rolled to get out of his way.

“He will see you all starve before he shares a single blade of grass with you!” she yelled out over Holler’s furious grunting.

Quake was at her side again now. A moment later, so was the zebra, and then the monkeys were climbing up onto her back, baring their fangs at Holler, and she didn’t flinch, even when their pinching fingers caught on her bruises and her stings.

“He tricked and killed his way to leadership,” she announced, turning her gaze on the buffalo. “He manipulated you and abandoned you when you needed him. You can do the same! Great Mother Starlight used to say,” she added, a flash of inspiration hitting her, “it is never too late to turn away from evil!”

She kept moving, stumbling a little over the uneven ground as she spun to address more creatures—and to put more of them between her and Holler. She felt as if she was riding a great wave, and whether it would crash down on her or on Holler, there was no way to get off now.

“Holler tells you that it’s necessary to punish wrongdoers, that Codebreaking in the name of survival is not Codebreaking. I agree!” she said before she could think too hard about it. “And you all know, every one of you, who it is that has threatened your survival. Who prevented you from drinking when you were thirsty?”

“Holler!” cried Grass, and other voices took up the call readily and angrily.

“Who killed Bellow before he could pass on the Way?” she prompted the other buffalo.

“Holler,” said Stomp in a low voice. A shock ran over Whisper’s spine, but she nodded at him.

“Holler,” she agreed. “Holler believes that because he is big and powerful, he can trample over the rights and lives of all of you. But

together, you are bigger, stronger than he can ever be. It is time, Bravelands! Join us and rid us of this tyrant! This *pretender*!”

Holler was backing away from an advancing line of animals. Two large hippopotamuses let out huge roars and stomped toward him, and Holler looked afraid for almost the first time Whisper could remember. Behind them, Whisper saw a coalition of cheetahs and a pack of wild dogs, running together toward him. Grass-eaters and small mammals leaped out of their way, letting them through to get to Holler.

“Rushing!” Holler screamed. “Get over here! Protect your leader! Loyal buffalo, form the Shell!”

But Rushing was looking around, jumpy at the sight of the oncoming rush of predators, and the other buffalo, even his loyal males, seemed suddenly to discover they couldn’t hear him.

“Drive him out!” Quake cried in triumph. “Let him wander the plains alone and forsaken!”

But it was too late for that. Whisper realized, with a sickening lurch, that Holler was backing away directly into the watering hole. He slipped in the mud, one hoof sinking deep, and while he was wrestling back out, there was a movement behind him.

The crocodiles slunk toward him from the water, the hippos and the predators from the land. Holler’s back legs splashed into the muddy water, and he froze.

Whisper saw the look of terror in his eyes as he realized his mistake.

She wondered if she could call the crocodiles off again. Make sure that Holler lived, a miserable and rejected life. She could try.

But she did not.

A massive crocodile surged from the water and gripped Holler by the underside of his neck. He fought, his enormous bulk staying standing for a few more seconds, as the creature’s teeth sank deep into his throat. He opened his mouth, tried to howl in fury, but it was a wet and strangled sound.

Then the water around him was churning, crammed with countless hungry crocodiles, and he was dragged back and under, into the small part of the watering hole still deep enough to close over his head. His large horn surfaced once, then a twitching hoof, and then Holler was gone, nothing but a bloody foam and some floating strands of hair.

Whisper wanted to faint. She wobbled on her hooves, and Quake rushed to prop her up.

A moment later there were more bodies pressing against them both, zebras and hippos and buffalo and even some valiant gazelles propping them up and leading them to an open space, where they both collapsed, gasping.

Grass hurried over and began fussing around, encouraging creatures to give them some more space, leaping into action to calm the snapping wild dogs.

Gradually, the watering hole became still once more, and the creatures fell quiet and looked, all of them, at Whisper.

Her heart was still pounding, her blood singing in her ears like the buzzing of a bee swarm. But she heard, above it all, a lone voice crying out.

“Please,” it said, a high-pitched, friendless, breathless voice. “Who’s in charge here? I need help, please!”

Whisper turned slowly, feeling a little as if her head might simply fall off if she moved too fast. The plain looked empty, but at last she managed to focus on the small, tawny shape.

It was a lion cub.

It was *the* lion cub. . . .



## 23

*In the gray tunnels, Stonehide stopped walking and let out a hiss that sounded almost like pain—but when Stride looked around, his friend didn't seem hurt. His ears were flat, and his eyes darted around, left and right and back the way they'd come.*

"Can you hear that?" Stonehide said.

Stride paused, listening. He could hear several sounds. The soft rasp of their breathing, the scuff of Echo's hooves as he stopped and turned to look back at the honey badger, and other, less familiar sounds too. A distant scraping sound that he hoped was just burrowing insects. Something somewhere creaking like old wood in a strong wind. And was that . . .

whispering? Right on the edge of Stride's hearing, dancing in and out of perception, he thought he heard voices.

"I think there's someone following us," Stonehide said, so quietly Stride could barely make it out.

Stride shuddered from his ears to the tip of his tail.

"Is it the hyenas?" Echo whispered. "Did they follow us in?"

"Maybe," said Stonehide. He seemed doubtful. Stride shook himself.

"We can't get distracted," he said, "*Epecially* if they're on our tail. Let's try the next one."

They had retraced their steps back up the tunnels, and one by one they had tried each of the turnings they came to. Some had led to long, confusing detours, others to sheer drops or sudden, blocked-off passages. A few had been so choked with those strangely colored crystals that there was no way Stride or Echo would be able to squeeze through.

Stride wasn't even sure what they were looking for. Spirits, yes—but who was to say that the spirits would look like themselves, or like anything at all? He was starting to have a recurring, invasive thought that they could be walking on the spirits of Flicker and Bellow right now, or they could have been genuinely turned to insects or crystals. What if Bellow had been transformed into a centipede, and Stonehide had *eaten* him?

That didn't feel likely, but he couldn't stop thinking about it either.

They pushed on in that place that had no day or night, looking for *something* that was different, a clue that there even was anything to find. And at last they found a turning that looked promising—lined with pale crystal and ending at another open cavern. This one also had a long drop, a chasm where the darkness lay heavy and black, and more jagged crystals stuck out from the walls, almost like teeth in a maw that would have liked to devour them.

But this time there was a way to cross. A stone precipice jutted out from their side, crossed right over, and joined to the far side, where another tunnel opening could just be seen in the gloom.

"Are we really going across there?" Echo asked.

"I think we have to," said Stride. "Imagine if we don't, and Bellow's spirit is just on the other side of that tunnel. . . ."

"I'm too big," Echo muttered. "I'll overbalance. I'll fall in."

"You'll be fine. Just . . . don't look down," said Stonehide.



He stepped out onto the stone bridge, immediately failing to take his own advice, peering over the edge as he went. He shuddered but made it across. "See?" he said, turning around on the other side to wave his tail at his friends.

"It's all very well for him," Echo muttered. "He's tiny. . . ."

"It'll be all right," said Stride. "Do you want to go next?"

"No, you go," Echo said. "I need a minute."

Stride wasn't sure that was the best plan, but he nodded and stepped out over the stone ledge. It felt unnatural under his paws—it was too smooth and even.

*Nothing here is natural*, he remembered as he forced himself to keep walking, focusing on the other side. *This isn't a real place. Its rules are different. . . .*

He made it across without much difficulty and allowed himself to look down as he got off the ledge onto the other side. The drop was dizzying, and he couldn't see the bottom. If there was one.

"You can do it, Echo," he called over to the buffalo. "Just keep moving."

Echo put a hoof on the stone, then another, testing its weight. It held firm.

"Come on," said Stonehide. "For Bravelands!"

Echo looked up at them, an uncharacteristically angry look on his normally sweet and open face. "If he's not there and we have to come back again," he said, "I'm . . . I'm . . . I'm going to be really cross!"

"You're all right," said Stride, trying to be soothing. "Just keep moving, slow and steady."

Echo took a deep breath and let it out again, then stepped forward. One step, two, three, four . . . he was right out over the chasm now, and Stride could see his legs starting to shake.

"Just keep moving," he said again. Echo was snorting with the effort, but he managed another few steps.

He was just past the very middle of the bridge, when they heard a *crack*. Echo roared with terror as the stone shifted a little under his hooves. He ran with a clatter and a shriek, almost losing his footing. Stride and Stonehide had to leap aside as he reached them, barreled past, and ran headfirst into the wall with a horrible crunch.

He stood there, horns against the stone, blowing out air through his nose, for a moment longer.

Stride looked at the bridge. It didn't seem about to tumble into the chasm—but a crack had appeared, snaking through it. He caught Stonehide's eye. Would it hold up if they had to cross it again? He didn't want to guess.

"Let's keep going," Stonehide said. He wiggled between Echo and the wall, raised himself up on his back paws, and put his front ones comfortably on Echo's chest. "Come on, chosen one. Got to keep going."

Echo shuddered but nodded.

The next tunnel began the same as the last, gray rock walls, gray light, vivid bruise-colored crystal. But as they walked, the light changed to a strange silvery glow. There were currents on the air, brushing Whisper's face.

The tunnel opened into another large cavern. This one was dotted with columns of rock, stalagmites and stalactites of gray rock, with crystals embedded in them and sticking out of them at strange angles—almost as if they had grown there, instead of forming naturally within the earth. There was water here, too. It dripped from the ceiling, making a hollow, musical sound as it struck the puddles on the floor and the edges of the stalagmites.

The light here was definitely not the odd, steady glow they'd seen in the other passages. It flickered, shadows shifting on the walls, like moonlight reflected on water. It seemed to be emanating from the middle of the chamber, though Stride could see no source for it.

Lichen grew on the surfaces of some of the rocks here—the first sign of life they had seen other than the insects. It looked like it was struggling to survive down here, but the patches facing the center of the room, and that strange light, looked greener and more alive than the rest.

And the sounds . . . As well as the dripping water, there were other sounds, *animal* sounds. Chirping and huffing, mewling, scuffling, whispering. Stride thought he could almost make out words, but it was like a huge chorus of animals very far away. . . .

In the center, the cave dipped down in a huge bowl shape, and as the three companions approached and looked over the lip of it, Stride's breath caught in his throat.

*It's not moonlight. It's starlight.*

The center of the cavern was a black pool, its surface perfectly still. But there was no reflection of the cave roof and no bottom visible either—instead, stars flickered and danced in the water in front of them. Hundreds and hundreds of them, constellations and distant swirling patterns, just like the sky over Bravelands on a clear night.

“What is this?” whispered Stonehide.

“It . . . it’s the stars,” Stride said. “The ones that never made it to the sky. It’s . . .”

“It’s *them*,” said Echo. “We found them.”

He stepped closer, right to the pool’s edge, though he did not quite touch the surface.

“Bellow?” he said. “Are you there? Can you hear me?”

For a moment, nothing happened. Then Stride saw the stars in the pool begin to move, slowly at first and then faster. The surface rippled and changed. Something began to emerge. A single black horn, twisted and curled, and then a long face, and then a massive black body. It was a buffalo of pure darkness, with a bright star shining at the center of its chest. Stride, Stonehide, and Echo all took a number of steps.

“You came,” it said.

He moved like a creature of flesh and blood, and as he walked out of the pool, he became more solid, until Stride could almost have said he was just a very dark-haired buffalo—if it hadn’t been for the star, which was suspended inside him like a leaf floating in water.

“Bellow!” Echo gasped.

His old leader stepped all the way out of the pool and lowered his massive head toward Echo, who gingerly touched his nose to it.

“I am so very proud of you, young Echo,” said Bellow in a voice that resonated around the whole chamber. “I didn’t know if it was possible. . . . The oxpeckers chose wisely indeed.”

“Bellow,” Echo said, “we might not have much time, Holler has taken over the watering hole and creatures are starving, and the Great Devourer . . .”

“I know,” said Bellow gently. “No need to fill me in. One of the curses of this realm is to know all that happens above but not be able to change it.”

“Until now, we hope?” Stonehide put in.

Bellow turned a soft smile on the honey badger. “Until now,” he said. “Come, Echo. Sit with me, as we should have done all those days ago.”

He lowered himself to the ground among the glittering stalagmites. Stride could have sworn that some of the lichen closest to Bellow turned a more vivid green as he sat there. Echo sat down with him, their heads almost touching. Bellow began to mutter something, too low for Stride to make out.

“Do you think we ought to be watching this?” Stride muttered to Stonehide. “This is their sacred . . . *thing*, after all.”

“Avert your eyes if you want,” said Stonehide. “I want to see if it works.”

Stride was about to make a comment about not being able to *see* knowledge, when he realized that something actually was happening, between Bellow and Echo. Bellow’s star seemed to dim a little—it still burned bright, but there was a sparking glow to it that was no longer there. A moment later, Echo and Bellow leaned their horns together, and both Bellow’s huge broken one and Echo’s small stubby ones glowed with a golden, sparking light like flecks of sun. Then Bellow lifted his head and looked down at Echo.

Echo took in a deep gasping breath. “I *know*!”

“Thank the Spirit,” said a voice that made Stride shiver right down to his bones with anticipation and grief. He turned and saw her. She was sitting on a rock nearby, her own heart-star burning bright in her chest. A groan escaped his lips.

“Flicker?”

He sprinted toward her, frightened she might vanish, but she did not. When he reached her side, he pushed his head into her neck. She was black all over, just like Bellow, but she felt real, she smelled real. He breathed in her scent, the same as it always was, fresh and wonderful and familiar. She licked him between the eyes and nuzzled him back.

“You’re real,” he choked out. “I knew it, I knew it was really you. . . . I can’t believe you’re back. . . .”

“In this place, I’m real,” she said. “Oh, Stride, I missed you so much!”

“I never gave up hope,” Stride told her. “I knew there had to be some way to get you out of this place. We need to—”

He broke off as a new noise from behind them, along the tunnel they had come down, caught his attention. It was a slight creak and then a small thud.

*The bridge . . .*

“We have to go,” he said. “Now.”

There was a slight tremor in the ground, and Stride looked over at Echo as Bellow got up to his hooves. “You should,” he agreed. “You have the Way now. The Great Devourer knows, and it is very angry. It will destroy this place to trap you here. Go, quickly.”

“Thank you!” Echo gasped, and with a last bow to Bellow, he turned toward Stride.

“Stride, look out!” Stonehide gasped, and Stride turned just quickly enough to catch the swipe of claws in his side, instead of the back of his head.

He spun to look at his assailant, expecting bugs, and instead found himself staring into the very real, alive face of Jinks.

“*You!*” he hissed, then dropped to the ground and rolled to avoid another swipe. “What are you—”

Jinks yowled and tried to pounce on him, and Stride leaped out of the way.

“What are you *doing?*” Stride spat. “You followed me *here?*”

“Flicker,” Jinks said. “You came for her. You were going to steal her back from death, like you stole her from me!”

“Hey!” Flicker shouted, leaping down from the rock and putting her body between Jinks and Stride. “I am *here*, Jinks. Look at me.”

For a moment, Jinks did look at Flicker, and the expression on his face changed to a sort of confused horror as he properly took in her black fur, black eyes, and the star in her chest.

“Nobody stole me,” she snarled. “Nobody owned me, not the Devourer, not my parents, not you, and not Stride. I chose him. You have a problem with my choices, fight *me!*”

“We were promised to each other,” snarled Jinks. “You know there was no choice. You defied me, and he betrayed me! I’ll kill you both.”

“You don’t have time for this,” came Bellow’s voice, loud and echoing in the cavernous space. “Listen!”

There was a crunching sound. Stride looked up and saw a crack appear in one of the stalactites overhead. The water that had been gently dripping instead began to pour down, landing on the stalagmites below in a stream that splashed and spat freezing water over them all. “Oh no,” he whispered.

“The Devourer knows you have found us,” Bellow said urgently. “It can and will crush you living creatures. Your spirits will be trapped here for

eternity. Echo, you have to get out, *now*.”

“Go, Echo!” Stride said. “Come on, Jinks, let’s finish this in the real world. . . .”

Jinks didn’t answer. His gaze wavered between Stride, Bellow, and the cracking cavern ceiling. Then, without any more warning, he pounced on Flicker. She let out a surprised yelp, lost her footing, and fell under him. Jinks sprang off her chest, leaving her gasping, and went for Stride, claws out and roaring.

Stride tried to roll aside again, but Jinks’s move had been too quick, and he landed claws first on Stride’s flank. The blow sent him reeling into the jagged side of a stalagmite, which hurt more than Jinks’s claws had. Stride hissed and bit at Jinks’s leg, closing his teeth in the flesh. For a moment they were locked together, sliding down the stalagmite, trying to pull away and hold on at the same time. Stride brought his back legs up and kicked with all his might, a powerful jab that would break the neck of a smaller creature. He felt one of Jinks’s ribs snap, and a wheezing breath was knocked out of Jinks’s muzzle. His claws retracted, and Stride let go of his paw so that he could slump back.

“Go on!” Stride heard Stronghide’s voice and Echo’s hooves clattering on the stone.

“Take Echo,” he gasped. “Get out. . . .”

“Coming back for you,” Stonehide snarled.

As Stride got to his paws, he saw Bellow standing at the edge of the star pool, watching. A scatter of pebbles fell from the ceiling and splashed into the pool with a strange, soundless ripple. Bellow nodded once to Stride, and he thought he saw him make eye contact with Flicker, though they didn’t speak. Then the great buffalo walked back into the pool, sinking beneath the surface and disappearing.

Jinks was getting back up, his breath coming in ragged gasps.

“Let it go, Jinks!” Stride snarled. “Let’s just get out of here!”

More rocks were falling now.

Flicker yelled, “Look out, Stride!” as a crystal hit the ground nearby and shattered into purple shards. Stride ducked his head, protecting his eyes, and when he looked again Jinks was right there. Claws raked his face and his sides.

Flicker tried to intervene, but she couldn’t get between them. Stride yelled and reared up, clawing him back, landing a blow on Jinks’s face that

sent him reeling. Flicker pulled him back by the tail, let go, and scampered back as he turned to aim a swipe at her.

Stride saw his opening: Jinks's throat exposed, his attention distracted. Above their heads, a crack snaked right across the cavern ceiling, sending a shower of pebbles and water over them both, making the stalactites shake. Flicker yelped as she dodged a falling boulder almost as big as she was. The sound was deafening.

"I'll give you one more chance!" Stride roared as his ears rang. "Leave this stupid grudge and save yourself!"

There was barely understanding, let alone peace, in Jinks's eyes as he turned back to face Stride. But then, soaked and bloodied, his jaws foaming and his eyes reddened, he took a step back. Stride glanced over his shoulder toward the tunnel, looking for Echo and Stonehide. Jinks sprang into a run. He veered away from Stride, and for a second Stride really thought he was going to do the sensible thing.

But he kicked off a stalagmite, and Stride realized, too late, that he was coming for him again. This time from an angle Stride wasn't ready for, he bore him to the ground once again, face-first into the shards of crystal and rock that now littered the ground. Stride tried to throw him off, but he felt the pricks of Jinks's teeth in the back of his neck. . . .

With a roar, Flicker pounced, knocking Jinks off Stride. She threw him to the ground just as a huge crack sounded from the ceiling above. A stalactite shifted once, twice, in a shower of dust and water.

It was going to fall.

"Flicker, get out of the way!" Stride shouted.

But Flicker looked up, saw the stalactite, and did not move. She held Jinks down, and Stride saw her lean over and snarl something into his ear.

Then the stalactite plummeted, burying them both in an instant. There was a horrible *crunch*, and the rock disintegrated into a pile of stone and vivid red crystal. Stride's heart dropped into his paws. . . .

"No . . ."

Dust cleared, and from behind the debris pile, Flicker appeared unharmed. A shiver ran down Stride's spine. She ran over to him and pressed herself against him, and he felt that she was shivering too. He didn't understand. He'd seen her, right where the mass of rock had collapsed.

"I'm dead," she explained quietly. "This place can't destroy me."

"But did it . . . did it hurt?"

“Never mind that now,” said Flicker, shaking herself. “If you don’t get out of here, it *will* destroy you! Go, you beautiful idiot!” She shoved him hard in the side.

“Come on, then,” Stride gasped and ran for the tunnel entrance. He could just see, at the other end, the shapes of Echo and Stonehide reaching the bridge.

He turned to make sure Flicker was following him. She was not.

“Come *on*!” Stride said. “We can get you out of here, we know the way!”

Flicker blinked. “I—no, Stride. I’m dead, I can’t go back with you.”

Stride shook his head. “You don’t know that. I can do it, we have to try!”

“I’ll miss you too,” said Flicker, then ran to him and pressed her head beneath his chin. “I’ll miss you, but I’ve had my life. You need to understand that.”

“That’s *not true*,” Stride said. “You barely had a life at all. . . .”

“Sometimes we don’t get to have long . . . ,” Flicker said gently.

“Stop,” said Stride desperately, his heart hammering, the thumping of falling rocks echoing the feeling up through his paws. “You weren’t killed by a lion or a sickness or hunger, you were *taken*, by Death! I should be able to take you back!”

He shuddered again, knowing he sounded like Jinks—but this was different, she loved him, surely she would see that she could go with him?

“I’m not leaving without you,” he said. It came out as a wail. “I’d rather stay here. This place can kill me, and I’ll be with you, as a spirit. There’s nothing for me aboveground without you!”

Flicker’s black eyes widened. “No, Stride . . . that’s not . . .” She hesitated. “All right. I’ll come. I’ll *try*.”

Stride licked her hard between the eyes, relief flooding through him. “Come on, or we’ll be trapped here anyway!”

They scrambled up the tunnel and reached the stone bridge just as Stonehide was getting to the other side.

“No choice, Echo,” he said, turning back. “Got to—”

Echo squeezed his eyes shut, took a deep breath, and opened them again. Then he broke into a clattering run, right out over the chasm. He let out a keening cry of fear as he ran, but he didn’t stop, even when the bridge started to give way under his hooves. He was two paces from the other side



when it began to slip. Flicker yelped. With a scream, Echo kicked off and jumped. He fell in a heap on the other side, almost crushing Stonehide beneath him, but he was back on safe ground when the bridge slid, cracked, and fell into the endless chasm.

Stonehide turned to look back at Stride and Flicker.

“Go on,” Stride called over. “We’ll find another way!”

“Stride,” said Stonehide. “Mate . . .”

“Echo’s got to get back and save Bravelands, *you’ve* got to get him there,” Stride said. “I’ll find you!”

He wasn’t sure he believed it, and he didn’t think Stonehide did either. But he sniffed, straightened up, and prodded Echo into rising and heading off up the tunnel.

Stride looked at Flicker. Would it be so bad to be stuck here forever, if it was with her? Death might be painful, but would it be so bad if she was here?

Flicker, though, was looking at the chasm.

“We can jump it,” she said.

“No,” Stride said. “It’s too far. . . .” But he looked again, and . . . maybe she was right? It was a long way, but cheetahs could jump a long way. Had he ever made a jump that far? He didn’t think so, but . . . had he ever tried?

“I mean, *I* can,” Flicker said with a soft, teasing nudge on Stride’s shoulder. “I could always jump farther than you.”

Stride felt a swelling of warmth in his chest. “No way,” he chuckled. “Farther than me, the fastest cheetah in all of Bravelands?”

“Well, you are now that I’m dead,” Flicker joked. “Are you sure you want me back? You might not need the competition.”

They smiled at each other, and for a moment, despite Flicker’s ghostly appearance, the chill underworld air, and the throbbing sound of the tunnels creaking and cracking around them, Stride felt as if they were strolling across the plain in the warm sun, without a care in the world.

Then the reality of it hit him again, and he nodded.

“Just you watch,” he said. “I’ll make it.”

He backed away down the tunnel, as far as he dared, giving himself the longest run-up he could. Flicker stood out of his way at the edge of the chasm, the star in her chest flaring brightly.

He fixed his gaze on the other side, bunched his muscles, and sprang into a sprint. At the last moment he put on an extra burst of speed, and then

he placed his back legs on the edge, tucking his forelegs back and in against his ribs, lengthening his body as he flew through the air, reaching with his front paws . . . and they struck earth, and he was across in a shower of gray dust.

He turned, panting and grinning, to look back at Flicker.

"No problem," he chuckled. "Come on!"

Flicker just gazed at him.

Stride's face fell. He felt like he'd been plunged into cold water. "No . . ."

"I can't," she said gently. "It doesn't work like that, Stride. I can't go much farther from the pool, from the others. We won't be here for long," she said. "I can feel the wind changing. The Devourer's grip is failing, the stars are calling. Just get Echo to safety, and I will be safe too."

"But not alive." Misery choked the words out of Stride. "I'll be alone."

"No," said Flicker. "Never."

"Stride?" came Stonehide's voice from the tunnel mouth. "Mate, you made it!"

"Run fast, Stride," said Flicker. "Show the spirit of Death how fast you really are."

Stride still couldn't move. He couldn't take his eyes off Flicker. He knew the moment he did, she would be gone . . . really gone. . . .

Pain burst in his tail, and he spun around to see Stonehide with Stride's tail gripped in his jaws.

"Come on!" he growled, letting go.

Stride looked back desperately—and Flicker was still there, blinking softly at him despite the thunder of cracking rock around them.

"You tricked me," he said. "You lied to make me leave."

"I lied to let you live," she said. A tiny, desperate part of him thought about jumping back, but he knew that this time he wouldn't make it. There was no space for a run-up, and all the strength seemed sapped from his limbs. If he tried, it would be for nought. He would fall short, and he would force her, his love, to watch him die.

"Live, Stride," she said. "Until you die. For me."

"I will," he said.

Stride took a step, and then another. He turned away and looked back. This time she was gone, and all he saw was a shower of stones and dust and the darkness far below.

“We’re coming, Echo!” Stonehide called and opened his jaws, threatening to bite Stride on the tail again. Stride whipped it out of his paws.

“Let’s go!” he said and broke into a run.



## 24

*Breathstealer waited. The edge of Black Branches was unusually quiet. The creatures who usually took shelter from the sun there had fled at the sight of her and her clan. They were weak, sickly things that were half a step from joining the Devourer's army in any case. There had been a molting old lion who had looked like he might remain, until he saw Breathstealer. She didn't know exactly what she looked like, but apparently he could see that she was not to be trifled with. The Devourer looked out through her eyes, and the lion turned in terror and ran.*

"Shouldn't we go in?" asked one of her clan.

"No need," Breathstealer replied. "They're coming to us."

She could see them. Blotches on her vision, like sunspots, moving through the trees. They thought they had escaped the Great Devourer, but there would be no escaping her. Breathstealer sniffed, and another drop of blood landed on the ground at her paws. Her nose had been bleeding steadily since they left the lion pride, leaving a gruesome trail all the way here.

The shimmering spots grew larger and larger until they resolved into three shapes: a limping buffalo, a cheetah, and a honey badger. The Great Spirit had chosen its heroes poorly. Their bodies looked like they had been through a long and torturous journey. They were bleeding too, the cheetah most of all. Scuffs and scars covered their muzzles, and one of the buffalo's hooves was split.

The buffalo carried a faint glow from his chest and his horns, which Breathstealer assumed the others could not see.

"Oh, good," said the honey badger sarcastically. "More hyenas."

*It is time to end this,* the Great Devourer said. *They trespassed in our realm. They dared to commune with our prisoners. They must die.*

Breathstealer's mouth opened. Her lungs breathed in, without her say-so.

"*You shall not leave,*" said the Great Devourer. The back of Breathstealer's throat prickled with pain once again. She tried to swallow, but her throat was busy. "*You cannot be allowed to live. We drink your blood.*"

"We drink your blood," echoed the hyenas around her as one, as if they were truly a swarm with one mind all linked to hers.

"What in the Spirit's name is *that*?" said the honey badger.

"It's her," said the cheetah. "Don't you recognize her?"

"That's not Breathstealer anymore," said the buffalo calf.

"What do you want?" asked the cheetah.

"*The buffalo are mine,*" the Devourer replied through Breathstealer. She felt as if she was breathing sand. She tasted blood. "*They are useful to me, my agents of chaos. They will not migrate. The rains will never come.*"

"Everything will die," said Echo. "Your hyenas, your insects. Everything."

"*And I will have won,*" the Devourer replied. "*The final blow against the Great Spirit.*" The Great Devourer spat Breathstealer's blood onto the

ground in front of Echo. *"I have killed you once before, little buffalo. Don't you remember this face? She was there."*

"I survived," Echo said, but his eyes were widening. "Wait . . . I do remember. One of the hyenas . . . she tried to help me before I fell. That was you?"

Breathstealer frowned, or tried to. She remembered a moonlit night, tracking the rest of the clan to where they had cornered a terrified little buffalo calf on a cliff.

"What happened to you?" Echo said.

Breathstealer felt a stab of pain inside her mind, and the thoughts were gone.

She saw the prey animal before her, and she felt only the desperate hunger to kill it.

Hyenas surged past her, obeying a command she didn't know she'd given.

Breathstealer's own body felt light as air as she leaped for the buffalo's throat. She felt as if her teeth were lengthening, her jaw opening wider than it should. She barely registered the impact as the cheetah met her in midair, dragging her away from her prey, only the disappointment.

He was fast, so fast that he was circling around to drag another hyena off his buffalo friend before she had even got up. But he couldn't be everywhere at once. Hyenas hung off Echo's pelt, gnawed at his legs. His hair was thick, but it couldn't protect him forever. He staggered and fell to his knees, and Breathstealer heard a yelp as a hyena's leg was trapped under him. She moved in again, long legs carrying her quickly, her gaze fixed on the light in Echo's chest.

*We need it. We will consume it,* she thought—or was it the Devourer? *And there will be no rain, no respite, only death!*

But something was moving among the hyenas, flashes of black and white, moving in a blur. It was the honey badger. She saw chunks of mottled brown-black fur go flying, trailing flesh, as he savaged one of the clan. The hyena fought back, but soon she flopped back onto the cracked earth, and her blood ran down to meet the Great Devourer's darkness, and Breathstealer felt a burst of strength flow through her. She ran and leaped, digging her claws into the buffalo's hair. She clambered up onto its back, trying to get her needle teeth into its neck. As she looked down, her claws looked black, as if they were rotting.

She had to grip tight as Echo's body rocked, rising to his hooves once more and rearing up. He kicked out a hoof at one hyena, catching it across the back with a nasty *thump*, and Breathstealer was tossed into the air. She tried to hold on, but one of her blackened claws came away from her paw with a strange sucking sensation, and she was thrown off.

She landed with a crunch that she heard but didn't really feel and rolled back to her paws. A few other hyenas had been scattered too, and they also picked themselves up, ignoring bloodied noses and torn skin, and threw themselves back into the fight.

The cheetah looked even worse now than when he'd emerged from the underworld. There were deep cuts across his muzzle, and he was favoring one paw, the other striking the ground only when necessary. The honey badger was still fighting, but even that tornado of destruction could keep only two or three hyenas busy at once. The others swarmed past him and onto Echo, who was staggering again, his breath ragged.

Breathstealer braced herself for another leap, but as she did, she felt something in her paws. She thought it might be pain or tiredness—surely she should be feeling tired by now?—but it was something outside her, in the earth. A trembling.

She turned and looked out across the plain. A great cloud of dust was coming, like an earthbound storm. At its head, two small figures out in front of the rest. Another buffalo, and a small lion cub.

Breathstealer's eyes burned as she stared at the buffalo. She was only small, but the light in her chest blazed silver-bright, like staring at the sun. She was overcome with fear and hatred, the need to rip and tear and destroy. Blood oozed from her eyes as she beheld that light, and she blinked it away.

"Stop!" shouted Cub. "Breathstealer, please stop!"

*I . . . I can't . . .*

Breathstealer wanted to respond, but she couldn't find the words, even if she had been able to speak.

"*Finish it!*" the Great Devourer howled at the other hyenas, tearing Breathstealer's throat even more in its desperation. "*Kill him!*"

But the other hyenas didn't have the Devourer in their minds, only in their hearts, and at the sight of the oncoming storm, their hearts failed. Most of them took off running, yipping in panic. Some were distracted, and it was the last mistake they made, as Echo and his friends fought on with renewed hope and ferocity.

“That all you’ve got?” growled the honey badger, chasing after the fleeing hyenas, leaving a trail of bloody footprints. “Come back here and put up a real fight!”

Echo took his chance and ran to the oncoming buffalo. They surrounded him, swallowing him up, forming up into an impenetrable wall of enormous bodies, heavy hooves, and sharp horns. Breathstealer suddenly stood all alone, facing that burning light inside the female who led them. She could barely look at it, but the Great Devourer wouldn’t allow her to look away.

“*I see you, foul thing,*” the Great Devourer made her snarl at the buffalo. “*I can see what is in you, and I will not submit.*”

“Breathstealer,” said Cub again. His voice was quiet. Breathstealer tried to turn her gaze to look at him, but the Devourer wouldn’t let her.

“*I have a vessel now, and I will survive,*” it said.

Why wouldn’t it let her look at Cub?

“You don’t have to give in to the Devourer, Breathstealer,” Cub said. “It’s never too late to turn away.”

“*I don’t need lessons from a worthless cub like you,*” the Devourer snapped, and Breathstealer managed to wrest control back to look Cub in the eyes.

“You don’t want this,” Cub said, slowly approaching, even though it made the buffalo behind him gasp and step forward, muttering something about *Don’t go any closer*, and *Don’t touch it!* “‘We survive’ can’t be at any cost,” Cub went on. “You know this. I’ve lost everything, and so have you, but still, you don’t want everything to die. You wanted Nosebiter and her cub to live. You wanted me to live. Please, remember!”

For a moment, Breathstealer remembered.

She saw him, this little scrap of nothing, who should have been killed by her clan or by his own pride. He should have been a casualty of Bravelands’ cruelty many times over. But somehow life had clung to him.

“Find yourself in there,” Cub said. “Leave this thing that’s killing you and be free.”

“I can’t,” Breathstealer whispered. It hurt even more to speak with her own voice than with the Devourer’s, and she felt a spike of pain in her head as she forced it out, through a jaw the Devourer was still trying to hold shut. “It’s too late. I can’t get it out. . . .”

But she could. She looked at Cub. She had told him that he would find his name, like she had found hers.



She was Breathstealer, and she would be Breathstealer until the end.  
She turned and ran into Black Branches.

She was awake now, and she could move her limbs, despite the Devourer pulling on them, trying to trip her up. As long as she just kept moving, as long as she didn't let it back in, she could make it. . . .

*How dare you?* it screamed in her head as she crashed through the undergrowth. *How could you fail us like this?*

Breathstealer didn't answer.

This was her last chance. If she faltered even a little, she knew it would be over. The Devourer would wrest control back, and it would never let her out again. She would live the rest of her life watching through her own eyes as Bravelands withered and died, leading animals into war to massacre one another, and for what?

"For *what?*" she hissed to herself.

*Where are you going?* the Devourer demanded. She felt its anger behind her eyes, burning and thrashing against the inside of her skull. It grew even worse when she ignored it.

*Turn around!*

She felt it make another attempt to stop her paws. Fear gripped her, but she couldn't stop. She plunged headfirst into a curtain of spiderwebs and felt the creatures grab onto her fur. More and more insects swarmed up in front of her, biting ants and stinging wasps doing their best to stop her, but she shook them off. Just as she would shake off the influence of the Devourer.

The swamp was just up ahead. She smelled its rotten scent, even though the blood draining from her nose and the scent of her own fear.

"What happens?" she demanded, plunging into the shallow water. "What happens if you lose your vessel?"

*I cannot,* the Devourer sneered. *I will not allow you to die. No insect sting or predator's claw or burning sickness will take this body from me!*

"I bet you go back to your pathetic underworld," she gasped, wading deeper. "I bet when the rains come, you lose everything you've worked for all this time."

*You don't know what you threaten to throw away,* the Great Devourer screeched inside her head. *You will have power as you have never imagined!*

“I don’t want it,” she retorted. To her own shock, she heard her voice chuckling as she said it. “All I wanted was to belong, to help my clan thrive. They will die if I let you take over! Everything will die! I’m a fool, but I’m not an idiot.”

*Pathetic*, the Devourer said. She felt it writhe inside her, twisting her guts, squeezing her heart. *What you wanted was never important. I chose you because you were weak and needy. You were so desperate for approval, you followed my every whim, but you would never get it. Now you inspire horror, but deep down, you will never be more than Tailgrabber!*

It was a mistake to call her that. She waded even deeper, until she spotted the bent tree growing out of the swamp water, and she swam toward it with a determination that burned inside her, even as she felt her muscles twitch and nearly tear with the effort of moving against the Devourer’s will.

“That’s not my name,” she muttered.

And with that, she dived.

The water was thick and marshy, and she couldn’t see much, but she let her body sink. Every natural instinct screamed at her to swim up, to get back to the surface, and the combined force of her own body and the Great Devourer was almost too much.

But she found the roots of the tree and fought to crawl underneath them, trapping herself there under the water. Her lungs burned, and her heart broke, but the panic of the Devourer kept her going.

She opened her mouth and breathed in death. The swamp water flooded through her, into her nostrils, down the back of her throat. She convulsed, and everything went black.



*Echo looked taller. Could he really have grown, in the few days since he had left the Great Mother's clearing? His horns seemed longer, and he was perhaps standing a bit straighter. Undoubtedly he also looked a mess, his hair pulled out in places and covered in strange gray dust in others, his nose scored with scratches, and his legs bleeding badly.*

A great flapping sound drew Whisper's attention upward to where the oxpeckers soared overhead, landing on and around Echo, chattering to him in their high-pitched voices, asking if he was all right, picking bits of stone and torn flesh out of his hair. One of them came up holding a shard of

violent green crystal and dropped it with a yelp. It fizzled and vanished as it hit the ground.

"You really did it?" Whisper asked, not for the first time. "You really found Bellow?"

"I know the Way," Echo said with a faint, extremely tired smile. "We did it. And . . . where's Holler?"

"Holler won't be bothering us anymore," said Whisper simply.

"It's time," said Quake, appearing at Whisper's side. "Speak up, Echo. Let them know."

Echo nodded. He cleared his voice.

"Everybody!" he cried out. "I am your leader, chosen by the oxpeckers, and I have returned from the underworld to bring the rains to Bravelands. I know the Way. We migrate in the morning."

*Definitely standing straighter,* Whisper thought. *And finding his voice too.*

The cry of relief and joy that went up from the buffalo resounded off the dry plains, and the stomping of their hooves as they pranced and rejoiced was like thunder.

"Help!" came a small voice, and Whisper looked over, panic suddenly rising in her throat. It was Cub again. Had it all gone wrong? Had the Devourer returned?

He was rushing out of the trees. In all the excitement with Echo, Whisper had missed where he had got to. Had he really run into the forest after Breathstealer?

Stride the cheetah streaked toward him, and Whisper saw them speak briefly. Then Stride stared into the forest before taking off among the dark trunks, with Cub and Stonehide both on his heels. *Something has happened.*

"I'm going with them," Whisper said. "I need to know what's going on."

"Be careful!" said Echo. "I'll send help, but it's tangled and treacherous in there. . . ."

Everything everyone had said about the Black Branches forest was horribly true. There was water here, but it was obviously fouled. The undergrowth was flourishing, but there was no chatter of creatures thriving in it, only the occasional scattered skeleton or rotting corpse, and it almost seemed like it had been grown specifically to bar her way. Stride, Stonehide, and Cub vanished into the trees ahead, able to leap over or

squeeze under most obstacles, and Whisper struggled along behind, stomping her way with sheer bulk and determination. At last, the vegetation seemed to open up a bit, and her hooves splashed into the shallow, stinking water of a swamp. She saw Stride, Stonehide, and Cub standing around something on the bank. All three were soaking wet, as if they'd gone swimming in the horrible water—and when Whisper came a little closer, she could see why.

Breathstealer lay, slumped and unmoving and sodden, on the bank of the swamp. It appeared that they had dragged her out between them.

Whisper approached carefully, alert for signs of the Great Devourer's presence. But there was nothing.

*It's gone, and so is she.*

Whisper shuddered as she remembered the horrific sight of the hyena, as she had been when she was the vessel of the Great Devourer. There had been a darkness in the center of her chest, a sucking blackness that was hard to look away from, and her outsides had been no better. She had been bleeding from the eyes and ears, and her limbs had seemed too long, too bent—almost spiderlike. Her teeth were too sharp, her jaw too wide.

But none of that was true now. If the Devourer had physically altered her, then—oddly—death had changed her back. She looked pathetic, waterlogged . . . ordinary.

Cub let out a yowl of grief.

"Help her!" he said.

"How?" said Stonehide. "She's dead, little lion."

Stride was sniffing at the hyena's nostrils, as if testing for breath. "He's right, I'm afraid. She drowned before we could get her out."

Cub looked to Whisper. "There must be something *you* can do."

But Whisper didn't see what. The scruffy young cat looked distraught, which made no sense. Hyenas and lions typically *hated* one another, and from what Whisper knew of these two, their coming together had been anything but happy.

"She must have fallen and got stuck," said Stonehide. "Good riddance, I say."

"No!" yelled Cub with a ferocity that seemed impossible. "You don't understand. That wasn't her. She was *good*. She was decent." He jumped at the hyena's body, butting it with his head in an effort to wake her. "The

Great Devourer infected her somehow.” He rammed her again. “Stand up, Breathstealer. Please . . .”

“Enough, Cub,” said Whisper. “You can’t bring the dead—”

The hyena twitched. Stride and Stonehide both yelped and took a step back as her body convulsed twice, and a great gout of foul water came up from her mouth.

“She’s alive!” Cub gasped. “Breathstealer! Can you hear me?”

Whisper met Stride’s eyes as they both backed off. Her jaw tensed. Was this the Devourer coming back too?

Breathstealer coughed and coughed, rolling over onto her front, arching her spine, and racked with spasms as she expelled more swamp water from her lungs. Eventually she was left heaving and trembling.

“Why . . . what happened?” she whispered, her voice raw and bubbling. “Why am I . . . alive?”

Suddenly she leaped to her paws, wobbling madly from side to side as she did so. Whisper tensed again, lowering her horns.

“Where is it?” Breathstealer gasped. She looked around at the four of them, Stride and Stonehide and Whisper, and finally at Cub. “It’s . . . gone. The Devourer is gone!”

She crashed back down to her belly, laying her head at Cub’s paws. “I’m so sorry!” she gasped. “Please. I was such a fool! It got into my head, and it made me think there was nothing worth living for except power . . . and then it took that too. . . . I . . . I nearly doomed us all, for no reason. I’m so sorry!”

“It’s all right!” Cub said. “You did it! You got it to go away! I knew you could.”

Whisper stared at Breathstealer. She felt so torn. This was just a hyena—a *young* hyena, grieving and broken, and sorry for the chaos she had wrought. But Whisper also couldn’t stop thinking about Starlight. The hornet stings on her own back were healing but had not fully gone yet. Was this truly not the same creature who’d decided to murder the Great Mother in a fit of revenge?

“Sly the lion did not get his ideas from Great Mother Starlight,” she said. “I hope you know that now. She did not deserve to die for the Great Devourer’s plots.”

Breathstealer looked up at her, tears crusting her eyes. “I know that now,” she said. “I was just . . . my sister, and her cub . . .” She trailed off,

and Whisper felt a stab of sympathy at last. *She did a lot of this for her littermate, she thought. Her sibling. I can at least understand that.*

"You owe a lot to this cub," she said to Breathstealer. "You have a second chance, thanks to him."

Breathstealer nodded and licked the top of Cub's head. "I know," she said. "I never thought I'd be friends with a lion, let alone owe him everything. Anything you ever need, Cub, call me and I'll answer."

"I need a name," said Cub. Breathstealer swallowed.

"Are you sure?"

Cub nodded firmly.

"Then . . . I name you Valiant," said the hyena.

Valiant beamed.

It almost seemed strange that the rains hadn't already begun, filling the watering hole with delicious fresh water and the plains with soft green grass and rejoicing animals. Even though the sun still beat down over Bravelands, the air felt fresher as they returned, slowly and with much limping, to the watering hole, to gather the buffalo who hadn't been strong enough for the stampede to Black Branches. Stride the cheetah and the honey badger Stonehide accompanied them on either flank.

"Is Starlight going to be there?" Echo asked Whisper. The question made Whisper slow her steps further. With all that had happened, she hadn't had an opportunity to tell him. He didn't know. He must have sensed her dread, because he added, "What? What's wrong?"

Whisper sighed and faced him. "Echo, Starlight has gone," she said.

Echo's face fell, and he walked looking down at his hooves for a moment. "Was it Holler?" he asked.

"The Great Devourer," she replied. "She died bravely."

Silence fell as they continued. Whisper regretted her words. Starlight's death was more than brave. It was heroic. It was glorious. She had let the Great Devourer believe in its own power.

"She was a good leader," said Stride. "Kind. Wise and patient."

"Very patient," said Stonehide with a wink at Stride.

"What will you do now, Stride?" Whisper asked.

Stride took a deep breath and looked up at the sky, where the sun was just beginning to set, burning the horizon a beautiful pink-orange, and a few stars glinted in the deep blue distance to the east. Was it Whisper's

imagination, or were there a few more there than had been the last time she looked?

"I will go back to my coalition," Stride said. "I'll join Pace and the others and tell them Jinks is dealt with. They won't believe me when I tell them how," he added, and Stonehide shook his head ruefully.

"Not sure I believe it, and I was there," he said.

"I'm looking forward to being a normal cheetah again," said Stride. "Well—as normal as the fastest cheetah in Bravelands could be."

"Most arrogant cheetah, more like," Stonehide jeered.

"And best jumper," said Stride. "Don't forget."

Stonehide looked at Whisper and jerked his head at Stride. "You see what I have to put up with? Thank goodness I'm going to get some peace and quiet now."

Stride paused to sniff at a patch of dry grass. "You could come with me, you know. If you don't like the sound of peace and quiet."

Stonehide scoffed. "No thanks. Coalition life's not for me. All the lounging around. It's the solitary life I love. Going here, going there, frightening the fuzz off predators much bigger than me, eating what I like, when I like. I'm good, thanks." There was a long pause. "I might come and visit you, though," he said. "Once in a while."

They went on bickering good-naturedly, falling behind a little as Echo and Whisper walked on ahead. They were almost at the watering hole now, passing some trees that looked very dead, but perhaps they could be revived when the rains came. A small flock of vultures were sitting on a branch, and they turned to look at the buffalo as they approached.

"Whisper?" Echo said. "Where do you think the Great Spirit is now?"

"Yes! Where is it?" said the oxpecker perched on his horn.

"No hurry," said one of the vultures as they passed. "He has had enough shocks for one day. Tell him tomorrow."

Whisper smiled to herself, trying to decide what to tell him. She knew she should probably make some sort of announcement before they left. She knew there was a ceremony. But perhaps the birds were right, and it wasn't time just yet.

"It's time we had a wandering Great Mother again," another vulture said with approval. "Starlight had been lingering too long in this place. Go with your herd. Bravelands' needs will find you, don't you worry."



“You needn’t worry,” Whisper said to Echo. “I can feel the Spirit watching over us. Things will be okay.”

She heard a snorting laugh and turned to see Quake looking at her. He gave her a conspiratorial smile.

*Well, she thought, I did save his life by talking to those crocodiles. Of course he knows.*

She really could feel the Spirit too, within her and around her. She thought of Starlight, and of all the Great Parents past. Would she live up to their example? Would she face their troubles?

For a moment, she thought she could see an elephant’s trunk out of the corner of her eye. She heard the clopping of gazelle hooves and saw the shadows of baboons, cheetahs, rhinos, and other animals, all cast on the ground ahead of her.

*I will make you all proud, she promised them.*



## Epilogue

*“Never seen anything like it,”* said Littlepeck, bobbing and weaving in the air as he fluttered after the buffalo herd.

“There’re so *many*,” agreed Flutterbeak.

They fell silent again, gazing up at the stars. They were so bright, Littlepeck thought they looked like they had multiplied at least twice over.

“So mesmerizing.” He sighed. “It’s almost a shame.”

“Oh, I’m not sad,” said Flutterbeak. She looked toward the horizon, where a bank of dense clouds hung. Littlepeck could feel the warm air moving ahead of it, the changes of pressure that would lead, at last, to rain. “Have you ever seen anything so beautiful?” his mate asked.

“It’s going to be wet,” he teased her.

“I barely remember what rain feels like! My wings are dusty. Even the bugs taste dry these days.”

“Not for long,” said Littlepeck.

They flew down toward the front of the buffalo herd. Echo was there, walking in the front with his sister at his side.

“It’s still strange to see him, isn’t it?” he mused. “He’s so small! Do you really think he’s going to be able to lead them through the whole migration?”

“Of course he is,” said Flutterbeak. “It’s Echo! Are you saying we chose wrong?”

“No, no, not at all,” said Littlepeck. “Just look at him. Following his horns, like a true leader. It’s not going to be easy for either of them, but they’ll be okay.”

“Of course they will,” said Flutterbeak again. “He has the Way.”

“We came really close this time,” Littlepeck said. He bobbed down through the air toward Echo. “There are already a lot more bones out here than there should be. Soon it would’ve been the vultures dropping from the sky, and then us.”

“But look at it now,” said Flutterbeak, following him. “I can smell the future on the air.”

“You always had a lovely turn of phrase,” said Littlepeck.

They met up with Featherfleck and Shiverclaw on their way down and chirped their greetings to them. Shiverclaw was still munching on some

kind of bug.

“We should let them get infested more often,” she joked. “There’s all sorts going on in Clatter’s hair now.”

“Is this the first time we’ve had a Great Parent on migration?” Featherfleck asked. “We couldn’t remember another.”

“I think it’s the first time the Spirit’s chosen a buffalo at all, isn’t it?” said Littlepeck.

“You know, I think we should have known,” said Flutterbeak thoughtfully, “that it would be Whisper. After all, didn’t she listen to us when we were telling her Echo was alive? She followed us to find him. That’s the only reason any of us are here now.”

“True!” said Featherfleck. “It’s all down to us, really. Not elephants, or rhinos, or buffalo, but little birds!”

“More’s the miracle,” said Shiverclaw.

“Bravelands is just one miracle after another,” said Flutterbeak. “And long may it continue.”

“Hear hear,” said Littlepeck.

“Hey—do you feel that?” asked Featherfleck.

“Feel what?” asked Littlepeck—and a moment later, he knew what she meant.

A raindrop splashed against his wings. Then another.

Before he could shake them off, the clouds opened with a roll of thunder, and the sky opened its deluge over the parched land.

“Thank you, Great Spirit!” cried Littlepeck, fluttering in a joyful circle. “Oh, thank you!”

The buffalo beneath them stopped in their tracks, looking up with wonder and joy at the rain, sticking out their tongues to catch it. Slick hides glistened as the drops splattered and slapped the great backs, scouring the dust from their horns and dripping from long lashes and swinging tails.

“Their hooves shook the rain from the sky!” said Shiverclaw.

“One miracle after another!” said Flutterbeak.

Out at the front of the herd, Whisper said something to Echo and ran out alone to the nearest forming puddle. She splashed and danced in it, laughing and tossing her head. A moment later half the herd had run to their closest puddle and were doing the same.

## About the Author

**ERIN HUNTER** is inspired by a fascination with the ferocity of the natural world. As well as having great respect for nature in all its forms, Erin enjoys creating rich mythical explanations for animal behavior. She is also the author of the bestselling Warriors, Seekers, Survivors, and Bamboo Kingdom series.

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